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156
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issue



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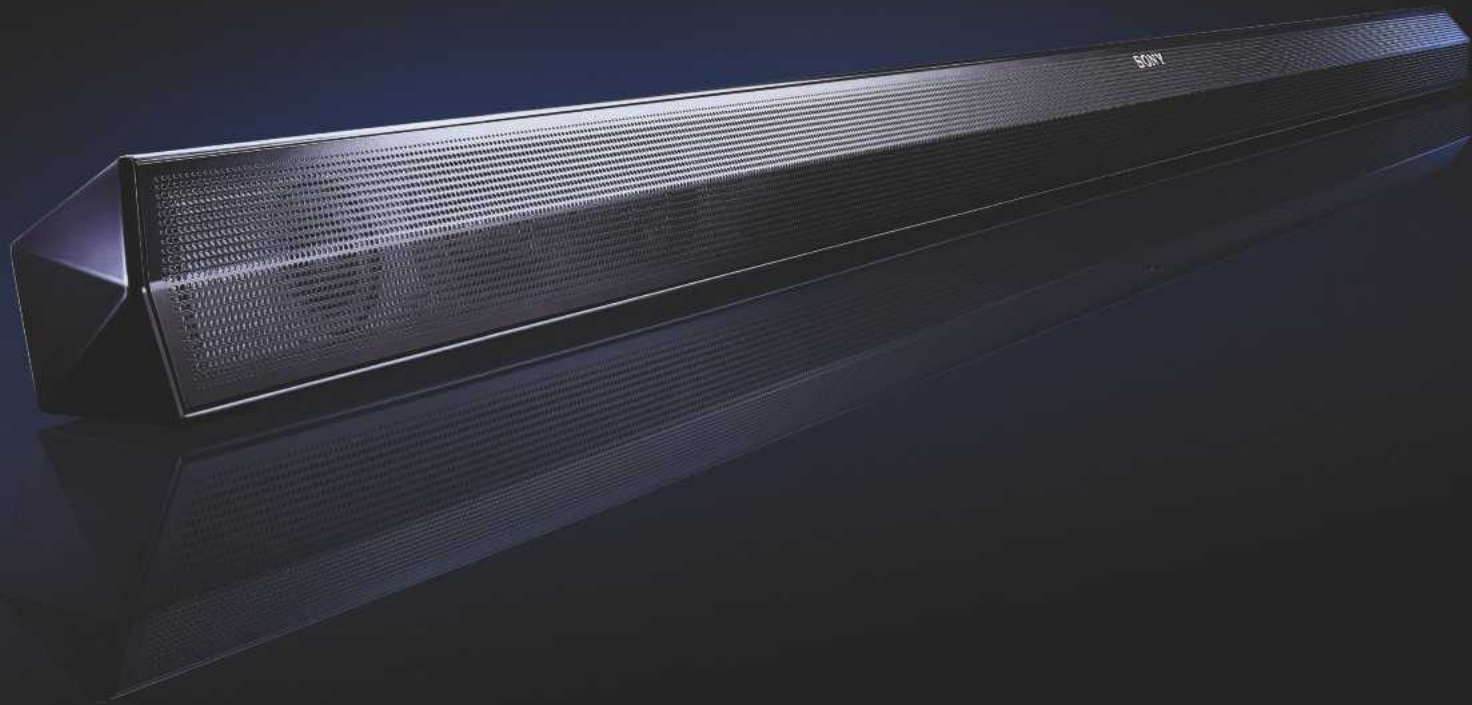
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Dazzling D.I.Y.
theatres, p122

WELCOME

There's no better way to bring an end to 2013 than
with our Yearbook issue, a 156-page special
celebrating the hardware and software that got our
pulses racing throughout the year. **Think of it as a
wishlist for the best home cinema equipment you
can buy** – from amps and projectors to bigscreen TVs and
speakers – and the Blu-rays and DVDs that just have to be part
of your collection.



The last 12 months have been a rollercoaster ride for AV
enthusiasts, not least because 4K has clearly taken hold. Yes, it's
early days for the format – in fact, there is currently no 4K format
to speak of, with even bang up-to-date components such as
Sony's new PlayStation 4 (see page 40) remarkably coy on the
subject – but there's no doubt that the future of our hobby is
packed with more pixels than ever before. So roll on 2014!

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer

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INNOVATORS IN SOUND

BULLETIN

→ **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS** SIM2 Crystal Cube projector adds Italian style to your home cinema
WIRELESS SPEAKER & AUDIO ASSOCIATION Calling time on speaker wire **LG** TV heavyweight is keeping the faith in plasma **KICK-ASS 2** Creator spills the beans on the shocking sequel **NEWS X10** The hottest news stories in bite-size chunks **RIDDICK** Hunt him down on Blu-ray and DVD **AND MUCH MORE!**

Slinging bling

Slingbox 350 → uk.slingbox.com



Sling Media has added a bit of bling to its family of 'TV Anywhere' media streamers with the arrival of the stylish Slingbox 350. Used to access TV remotely over the web from anywhere in the world, the company's latest piece of 'placeshifting' AV kit has been 'redesigned from the ground up' according to Sling Media VP and GM Michael Hawley. And at just £130, this box of tricks is also a bit of a bargain – although you will have to hook it up to your HD sources via component video as the Slingbox 350 doesn't offer HDMI connectivity...

HCC ONLINE...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag

Crystal clear

SIM2 Crystal Cube projector → www.sim2.co.uk



SIM2 is making the projector the focal point of the home cinema experience with its striking Crystal Cube model. Housed in a crystal-glass cabinet from acclaimed Italian designer Giorgio Revoldini, this new single-chip Full HD projector screams luxury and elegance, yet its £4,500 price tag makes it one of the company's entry-level offerings. Available in either a black or white finish, the Crystal Cube claims 2,500 Lumens brightness via its 200W UHP lamp, and offers twin HDMI inputs, 3D compatibility and can deliver images up to 180in.

Superior sounds



UK-based AV cable specialist Atlas has upgraded its Hyper range of speaker cables.

Engineered using similar principles to those employed in the creation of the high-end Mavros cables, the Hyper 3.5 employs 72 x 0.25mm high-purity OFC conductor strands encapsulated in a high-efficiency Teflon dielectric coating for 'improved clarity, openness and accuracy'. The Atlas Hyper 3.5 cable costs around £40 per metre unterminated, while a 2m factory-terminated run (using Atlas' 4mm Z-plugs or spades) costs £280. www.atlascables.com

Stand and deliver



Cambridge Audio is the latest sound

specialist to throw its hat into the 'sound plinth' arena with the release of the £200 Minx TV. This latest addition to the Minx range has been designed to support any flatscreen TV up to 47in and promises to deliver 'wide, room-filling and detailed sound' thanks to the combination of Cambridge Audio's BMR drivers and an integrated 6.5in down-firing subwoofer. Built-in Bluetooth also ensures that you can wirelessly stream music from your smartphone, tablet or laptop. www.cambridge-audio.com/minx-tv

The light fantastic



Philips has extended its Hue lineup of connected lighting with the

introduction of the GU10 spotlight bulb. The new lamp allows users to add accent lighting and spotlighting fixtures to Philips' Smart lighting setup and control them from their phone or tablet. The new Hue introduction pack (containing three GU10 spot lights, a Hue Wi-Fi bridge and power supply, plus a LAN cable) is available at Apple stores and Apple.co.uk, priced £179, with individual GU10 bulbs to add to that setup priced at £49 each. www.meethue.com

WiSA sets your speakers free

Organisation hopes to kick-start a revolution in wireless connectivity

Could speaker wire be about to go the same way as VHS and HD DVD? The Wireless Speaker & Audio Association (WiSA) certainly thinks so. It has joined forces with a number of AV manufacturers to establish a standard for wireless speakers that eradicates the need for lengthy and sometimes expensive cabled connections.

HCC met up with Jim Venable, president of California-based WiSA, to discuss the new standard and its implications for home cinema. Venable was in London for the launch of three new active wireless speakers by Bang and Olufsen, the first products to go on sale that meet the new WiSA standard. 'This is an historic day in the history of home theatre,' Venable told us. 'We chose B&O to be the first company with WiSA accreditation because we knew it would set a high standard.'

There are a number of key differences that set WiSA speakers apart from other wireless speakers, including the ability to handle 24-bit uncompressed audio at data rates up to 96kHz, extremely low latency (5ms) and negligible speaker-to-speaker



Jim Venable: 'The WiSA logo guarantees that these products will work together flawlessly in a home theatre environment'

delay (160ns). WiSA operates in the relatively unused 5.2 to 5.8 GHz UNII radio frequency spectrum. As such, Venable explained, 'it can reliably handle 7.1 surround, and transmit configuration and calibration data.' Most older wireless technologies operate in the crowded 2.4GHz frequency band.

More Bang for your buck

While B&O's new BeoLab 17, 18 and 19 are the first WiSA speakers on the market, Venable says that the association is growing (Sharp, Klipsch and Onkyo are members) and 2014 will see a number of other manufacturers join the WiSA party.

Additionally, all of B&O's TVs now feature built-in WiSA transmitters (older models can be upgraded with an external transmitter). When watching a Blu-ray, the TV decodes the surround sound signal

and the transmitter beams the decoded audio to every speaker. Depending on its position and role the speaker then amplifies the appropriate channel.

Setup of WiSA speakers can be made using an app or by automatic configuration if the speakers have built-in ultrasonic transducers, or pingers. These map the locations of the speakers and their channel assignments simply by turning on the system.

Look out for a review of the BeoLab 17 wireless speakers in a forthcoming issue of HCC.



PLAYLIST...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

Thor (All-region BD)

There was no way that Team HCC was going to catch up with *Thor: The Dark World* on the bigscreen without first revisiting the God of Thunder's action-packed debut on Blu-ray.



The Wicker Man: The Final Cut (Region B BD)



This long-awaited hi-def release for the cult horror classic exceeded all of our (rather lofty) expectations. Simply unmissable.

Grand Theft Auto V (PS3/Xbox 360/PC)



Will our love affair with this gaming blockbuster never end? Not as long as there are still planes to steal and games of tennis to be won...

Doctor Who: The Enemy of the World (R2 DVD)



This recently rediscovered Patrick Troughton *Doctor Who* serial made it to DVD in record time.

The Borgias: The Third Season (R2 DVD)



We've no idea why this final season bypassed Blu-ray in the UK – but it's still well worth a watch on DVD.

EXTRAS...

Small items that make a big impression

Iron Man Mark 42 Armor



Sideshow Collectible's life-size replica of the Mark 42 Armor from *Iron Man 3* will set you back a whopping \$8,500 (plus shipping) – but any aspiring Tony Stark will still want one in their movie den.

Crab Monsters, Teenage Cavemen and Candy Stripe Nurses



£20 will get you this gorgeous book looking back at the career of self-proclaimed 'King of the B Movies' Roger Corman, as told by the man himself and his contemporaries.

Guillermo del Toro: Cabinet of Curiosities



Take a trip into the mind of the acclaimed filmmaker with this lavish £40 collection of photos and extracts from the illustrated notebooks he keeps for every film.

About Time Vol. 7



The first two series of the reboot go under the spotlight in the latest addition to this frighteningly thorough series of *Doctor Who* guide books.

LG: 'Plasma is still popular'

Company to continue to offer PDPs, but says OLED is the way forward

LG has confirmed that it has no plans to withdraw from the plasma TV market in the wake of Panasonic's recent announcement that it is canning its PDP business – for the next year at least.

During a discussion about the Korean giant's TV business in general, LG Consumer Electronics' UK Commercial Director Andy Mackay told *HCC*: 'Plasma TVs continue to prove popular with consumers, offering large screen sizes at competitive prices, and therefore remain an important part of LG's TV lineup into 2014.'

Not that LG would appear to be making a play for the high-end plasma space that Panasonic has departed. The company clearly sees other screen technologies as the basis for its premium models. 'We believe that LED, UHD and OLED represent the future of home entertainment and provide a spectacular viewing experience,' says Mackay.

OLED in particular is where LG has stolen a march on its rivals, having launched the world's first 55in flat display, and two curved models (one Full HD, one 4K) in 2013. All use the company's bespoke WRGB technology, which adds a fourth white sub-pixel to the typical red, green and blue array, enabling LG's panels to match the BT.709 colour standard. It's a dead-cert that CES 2014 will see more models outed. When asked about sales, Mackay concedes that 'it's



LG's Andy Mackay: 'LED, UHD and OLED represent the future of home entertainment'

still early days for the OLED category', but says we can expect the market to grow rapidly next year with improvements to technology and cost economies allowing for 'mainstream pricing.'

Seeing is believing

With 4K the current buzzword in AV, LG will obviously build upon its existing product lineup, which includes a first-gen 84in beast, next year. Yet Mackay offers words of caution to those expecting a rapid uptake amongst Johnny Public. 'There is an increased appetite from consumers for next-generation TVs, but of course it will take several years for 4K TV to become adopted by the masses, with product prices matching that of our

current top-of-the-range products.' The LG man believes demonstrating 4K to consumers will be key: 'Seeing is believing.'

Mackay also revealed to *HCC* that LG's tie-in with the Sky-supported Now TV video-on-demand service is already one of the strongest 'App Traffics' on its Smart platform, despite only launching in mid-2013.

LG's OLED screens use WRGB technology



Bigscreen 3D on a budget

New models make stereoscopic projection more affordable than ever

Vivitek has bolstered its home cinema projector range with the addition of two Full HD 3D models that promise 'a full cinematic experience in a residential setting', according to the company's general manager Holger Graeff.

As well as looking identical, the £760 H1180HD and £840 H1185HD both employ Texas Instruments' DLP DarkChip3 and BrilliantColor technologies, twin HDMI 1.4 inputs, integrated SRS WOW audio tech and a new high-efficiency lamp that the company claims will last for up to 6,000 hours in eco mode.

According to Vivitek, the H1180HD delivers 2,000 ANSI lumens of brightness with a contrast ratio of

10,000:1. Meanwhile the H1185HD offers even higher brightness performance, with claims of 2,500 ANSI lumens. That model also receives another boost in the form of ISF calibration for both day and night viewing.

Graeff claims that 'our new projectors will fit in perfectly with all types of custom installation, whatever the room size or lighting environment.'

Vivitek's two new budget 3D projectors may look the same, but they boast different brightness performance





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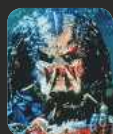
DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ DECEMBER

13: The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug 3D

The second part of Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Hobbit* brings more fiery dragons, thieving hobbits, kindly wizards and singing dwarfs to a cinema near you.
www.warnerbros.co.uk

**16: Predator 3D**

The intergalactic big-game hunter is the latest of Fox's movie icons to be given the reton 3D treatment.

Could it result in fans finally getting the good-looking *Predator* Blu-ray they've been praying for? Our fingers are crossed.
www.fox.co.uk

13: Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues

Ron Burgundy heads to New York to front a 24-hour news channel in this long-awaited sequel to Will Ferrell's 2004 comedy juggernaut that hopes to create some headlines of its own when it opens in UK cinemas.
www.paramountpictures.co.uk

23: Lovelace

Stuck for a last-minute Christmas present for the Amanda Seyfried fan in your life? How about this biopic of *Deep Throat* star Linda Lovelace, which hits Blu-ray and DVD today?
www.lionsgatefilms.co.uk

25: Christmas Day

Swap gifts, overindulge on turkey and mince pies, and then settle back in your armchair to watch Peter Capaldi make his debut in this year's *Doctor Who* Christmas Special!

26: 47 Ronin

Keanu Reeves will be slicing his way through your local multiplex in this fantasy actioner about a band of samurai out for revenge.
www.universalpictures.co.uk

→ JANUARY

06: Insidious: Chapter 2

The spooktacular sequel to James Wan's 2010 smash sets out to scare up a storm as it debuts on Blu-ray and DVD.
www.eonefilms.co.uk

09: HCC #230

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews.
www.homecinemachoice.com

INTERVIEW

'This is actually insane...'

Comic book scribe and *Kick-Ass* creator **Mark Millar** chats to HCC about wanting to be a superhero, that Jim Carrey incident and his love of *Jaws*

**Where did the inspiration for *Kick-Ass* come from?**

'It's actually pretty tragic, because it genuinely is autobiographical. When I was about 14 or 15 – a little bit too old for it to actually be funny – my best friend and I were planning on becoming homemade superheroes. It was probably the stress of exams or something. Anyway, we designed costumes for ourselves and went to karate class and the gym for six months. We were really planning it.

'Luckily we eventually thought: "Let's not do this, this is actually insane". So *Kick-Ass* is almost an alternate reality diary of what would have happened if I'd been stupid enough to go ahead with it.'

Given the great job that director Matthew Vaughn and writer Jane Goldman did with the first film, were you nervous about handing *Kick-Ass 2* over to a different filmmaker?

'I would have been nervous if it had been like *Jaws 2*, where Spielberg had nothing to do with it. As it was, this felt more like ...*The Empire Strikes Back* as Matthew's guiding hand was always going to be there. He was George Lucas in this scenario and hand-picked everyone, including [director] Jeff Wadlow. So I just relaxed.

'Matthew and I have a really good relationship, we talk on the phone almost every day, going back six or seven years to when he first bought the rights to *Kick-Ass*. And we're still doing a number of projects together – he bought the rights to *Superior* and is filming *Secret Service* right now – so I feel I'm in good hands with him.'

It's impossible to talk about *Kick-Ass 2* without asking about Jim Carrey. Have you spoken to him since he publicly distanced**himself from the film due to its 'level of violence'?**

'No. Nobody has spoken to Jim since he put that tweet up. We were all excited about the release and then suddenly Jim puts that tweet up saying that he's not going to be promoting the film.

'I think it's actually pretty clever of the gun lobby to get people talking about violence in films, because it distracts from the real issue – that it's entirely down to the access to weapons.

'So I think Jim played into the hands of the gun lobby by raising the subject of screen violence. But I can understand why he did it, because he had been getting a lot of flak from them for some online videos he'd done. So they used the fact that he was in *Kick-Ass 2* to make him look like a hypocrite. I think they had him in checkmate and he felt that he had to distance himself from the film. That's my reading of what happened.'

What can you tell us about the work you've been doing at 20th Century Fox?

'As well as *Secret Service*, I've also sold my comic *Nemesis* to them, which Joe Carnahan is directing, and a children's book called *Kindergarten Heroes*, which is about the children of superheroes. Then there's *Superior* as well.

Jim Carrey (left) back when he was happy to be part of *Kick-Ass 2*

'Fox also asked me if I'd like to be a consultant on their Marvel movies – they have *Wolverine*, the *X-Men* franchise and the *Fantastic Four*. So I've been doing that for about a year now and it's tremendously exciting. There's nothing I enjoy more than not working, not writing, and actually just sitting there and criticising other people. It's a total pleasure going out there and talking about superhero stuff.'

Do you have a favourite film?

'Populism is always frowned on, especially here in the UK – but sometimes things are popular because they're really, really brilliant. Like *Jaws*, *The Godfather* and *Star Wars*.

'I genuinely do believe that *Jaws* is the greatest movie ever made. I probably watch it twice a year and it's the perfect film. It's such a classic, universal story – there's a threat to the village and three men get together to end the threat. I always marvel at that, when somebody can simplify an idea like that.'

Kick-Ass 2 is available to buy now on DVD and Blu-ray courtesy of Universal Pictures

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



Pioneer TVs are back, but Kuro isn't

1 Pioneer returns to TV market

The Pioneer name will soon be reappearing on TVs in Europe – but AV fans shouldn't expect to see a return of the legendary Kuro plasmas any time soon. Dixons Retail has linked with the Japanese AV company, allowing the retailer the exclusive rights to source, develop, produce and sell Pioneer-branded TVs in selected European markets. The range kicks off in the Nordic countries this December with Full HD 3D LED TVs in 40in, 46in and 55in screen sizes. As yet, no decision has been made on whether the range will also come to the UK.

2 BT Sports deal

BT Sports claims it has 'shaken up the UK TV market' by scoring the exclusive rights to show all 350 Champions League matches each season from 2015. The £897m deal will bring to an end two decades of live Champions League football on terrestrial TV.

3 Woox! There it is...

Philips has terminated the agreement it had to sell its AV business to the Japanese firm Funai. Philips claims that it is taking legal action to recover damages caused by a breach of contract by Funai and is relaunching its AV business as a standalone subsidiary called Woox Innovations.

4 Hi-res audio set for CES

It looks like the AV industry is gearing up for a major push of high-resolution audio next year following the Consumer Electronics Association's announcement that there will be a dedicated 'Hi-Res Audio Experience' TechZone at the International CES 2014 tech show.

5 Auro-3D makes home debut

Datasat Digital Entertainment has partnered with Auro Technologies to add the latter's Auro-3D commercial cinema surround sound format to its high-end RS20i audio processor. According to Datasat, Auro-3D 'consists of three horizontal layers around the listener adding a height and top layer, currently absent from any other sound format', which allows a variety of speaker configurations up to 13.1.

6 Xbox One users not appy

Microsoft's Xbox One has suffered another blow to its multimedia aspirations in the UK. Sky has confirmed that it currently has no plans to launch a Sky Go app for the console and that the Now TV app won't launch until Summer 2014 at the earliest. BBC iPlayer was also notably absent from the console's initial wave of apps.

7 New look for Netflix

As a result of ongoing growth across Smart TV platforms and connected devices, Netflix has been given a radical new redesign created specifically for flatscreen viewing. And not only is the new look better suited to use tellies, Netflix has also overhauled the software running it, putting it all onto a single bespoke platform that will result in consistent upgrades across all compatible devices.

8 Ultra HD tests

And in other Netflix news, the company recently began 4K Ultra HD video tests in the US ahead of a planned launch of 4K movie and TV content on the service next year.

9 AWE-some new home

Custom install distributor AWE Europe has expanded into

a new facility in Epsom, Surrey. The new location will not only allow for increased stock handling, but will also 'incorporate better facilities for training, showcasing products and wider business development', according to AWE Managing Director Stuart Tickle.

10 Super-sized screen

NEC Display Solutions Europe has installed the largest public LED display in Europe on the facade of the Odeon Leicester Square cinema in London's West End. Measuring 107m² (half the size of a basketball court) the super-sized screen replaces the cinema's old poster board and is flanked by a pair of 18m² displays. The three screens were officially launched at the recent world premiere of *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* where they were used to show live interviews and clips to the public.



Can we get one of these huge LED screens too?

PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Barker bound for Hell

Dimension Pictures has invited Clive Barker to write the script for a potential remake of his 1987 horror *Hellraiser* after the author decided to pitch his own 'darker and richer' take on the idea.

Bourne for success



Having transformed the *Fast & Furious* movies into one of the most lucrative franchises around can director Justin Lin do the same for the *Bourne* movies? That's undoubtedly what Universal is hoping for after hiring the HCC favourite to step behind the camera for the fifth film in the spy series.

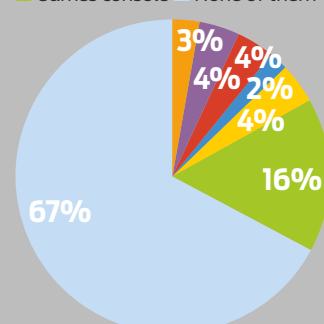
Heroes on Demand

Disney and Netflix are joining forces to bring four Marvel heroes to the small screen. The VOD platform has committed to individual 13-episode series for Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage and Iron Fist, to begin in 2015. The quartet of heroes will then unite in the 'mini-series event' *The Defenders*.

WE ASKED...

Which home cinema kit will you be replacing/upgrading this Xmas?


Television Speakers AVR Projector Blu-ray player Games console None of them



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

Diesel power

Riddick → EntertainmentOne
→ Region B BD/R2 DVD



Vin Diesel will be the universe's most wanted man once again when the sci-fi sequel *Riddick* explodes onto Blu-ray and DVD on January 13. The two releases share a trio of extras (*Vin's Riddick*, *Meet the Mercs* and *Riddick: Blindsided*) while the hi-def platter adds three exclusives (*The Twohy Touch*, *Riddickian Tech* and *The World of Riddick*). The latter is also the only place to catch a new Director's Cut of *Riddick*, which promises even more intergalactic bad-assery from Diesel's space-faring antihero.

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The dying art of plasma TV

Having decided it can take the technology no further and still be profitable, Panasonic is finally closing its plasma business. Videophile **Steve May** sobs in appreciation

IN JUST A matter of months, Amagasaki P4, the last of Panasonic's hanger-like plasma panel-making factories, will fall silent. A futuristic facility that in full-flight looked like something out of a Japanese *Gundam* anime, complete with robot workforce, will be shuttered for good. The lights will be switched off and a televisual era will unceremoniously end.

Panasonic's decision to pull the plug on its beloved plasma business will come as little surprise to fervent industry watchers. There's been no shortage of rumours regarding the corporation's

inevitable capitulation, not least because its TV business has been hemorrhaging yen for years. President Kazuhiro Tsuga even signposted the closure at the 2013 International CES, indicating that nothing was sacred in his quest to return the company to profitability.

According to the official statement, Panasonic's PDP lines are being closed 'in order to create a business structure that can respond to changes in the business environment and to accelerate the growth strategy of the company.' In other words, the



Left: Kazuhiro Tsuga, Panasonic's President, delivering his keynote speech at CES 2013

Centre: Panasonic's largescale manufacturing plant at Amagasaki

chances of ever balancing the plasma business sheet were deemed slim to none.

We visited the Amagasaki complex shortly after it opened. It was then-President Fumio Ohtsubo's proud boast that the company could produce over a million plasma TVs a month. Whether it ever managed such volumes is debatable. Panel production itself ended this month, with the remaining shebang ear-marked for closure at the end of March 2014.

Videophiles' choice

Long-time readers will rightly shed a tear at the news. For more than a decade, the Japanese major has been a vociferous supporter of plasma technology, much to the delight of videophiles who value the cinematic nature of self-emissive images. Unlike LCD TVs, which shine in high brightness (be it for an in-store display or well-lit living room) but grey-out in gloom, plasma screens actually come into their own when the lights dim and the popcorn

'OLED, with its astonishing dynamic range, seems the natural successor to plasma for die-hard film fans'

munching begins. When it comes to 1080p Full HD, plasma has consistently been the connoisseurs' choice. It's almost as if PDP was developed with movie-watching in mind.

Of course, during plasma's early years, such excellence didn't come cheap. First-generation screens typically changed hands for around £10,000, a premium that seems almost impossible to comprehend today (and certainly one that puts into favourable context the tickets found on the first wave of 4K/Ultra HD displays).

In truth, plasma tech has consistently found commercial success an uphill battle, and the history books are littered with big-name casualties: Sony and Toshiba bailed in 2006, Fujitsu and Hitachi walked away in 2008, NEC and Pioneer exited in 2009.

Despite increasing volume, plasma just couldn't keep pace with falling LCD panel prices. Panasonic points to the Lehman Brothers collapse of 2008 as pivotal. The strength of the yen internationally, coupled to indefatigable competition from its Korean rivals, ultimately made its PDP business untenable.

Of course, while movie fans generally praised plasma's attributes, the technology found itself cast as a villain by eco-zealots. With a higher power consumption than rival LED LCD, it was famously singled out for vilification by the California Energy

Commission. Back in 2009 the State declared that it was considering plans to outlaw all but the most energy-efficient goggleboxes, citing plasma in particular as a power hog. With similar punitive measures being mulled across Europe and in Australia, Panasonic accelerated plans for a new generation of energy-efficient plasma screens, so-called NeoPDPs.

Such controversy would do little for plasma's image as leading-edge hardware. The technology never quite managed to shake off the spectre of screen burn either, despite ever more benign plasma gases being developed and anti-burn pixel orbiters become standard fare. And when the 3D hype hit, plasmas didn't offer passive stereoscopy either. Nothing was going its way.

Final flatscreens

At least Panasonic seems determined to go out on a high. The brand's final range contains some epic screens which warrant serious investigation from those looking to upgrade their viewing. Topping the range is the TX-60PZT65, a stunning 60in model that stands as the pinnacle of plasma screen development – the quality of its 1080p images is nothing less than astonishing. With a profound black level performance, seemingly endless gradations and vibrant hues, it's a scorcher of a screen.

The rest of the range doesn't slouch either. Supporting the ZT are three VT models, the TX-P65VT65, TX-P55VT65 and TX-P50VT65. Below those sit a pair of GT heroes, arguably offering Panasonic's best price/performance punch, the TX-P50GT60 and TX-P42GT60. Then there's the brand's entry-level net-connected ST60s and the budget 720p X60 models. Expect some mighty clearance deals to surface in due course.

And even as Panasonic parks its plasma ambitions, there's still plenty to look forward to from the brand. Forward momentum in the TV market is now with Ultra HD resolution panels and OLED technology, both high on Panasonic's development agenda. OLED, with its remarkable dynamic range, seems the natural successor to plasma for enthusiasts seeking a sublime movie-watching experience.

As Panasonic's Tsuga told us: 'We have to go forward. There are various possibilities that we have to think about – the important point is that OLED will develop fast.'

Of course, die-hard fans of plasma image quality shouldn't despair just yet. Both LG and Samsung continue to produce and develop panels. LG champions the technology as a largescreen budget platform, while Samsung has taken to pushing the high-end. It seems the game's not over for PDP, it's just become a lot less exciting ■



Plasma enthusiasts are still served by LG and Samsung (pictured) screens

PLASMA MILESTONES

From birth to the final countdown?

1992: Fujitsu demos 21in colour plasma TV

1994: Panasonic begins plasma screen R&D in association with Plasmaco

1995: Fujitsu launches the world's first 42in PDP

2006: Pioneer unveils first Kuro panels at Japan's CEATEC show



2006: Panasonic introduces 103in Full HD plasma display

2009: Pioneer announces withdrawal from the plasma business

2013: Panasonic introduces the Studio Master Panel TX-60PZT65 with Pioneer DNA, but within months confirms its exit



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MOVIE AWARDS



Welcome to the *HCC* Movie Awards, where we take a look back at the Blu-ray and DVD releases of the past twelve months and celebrate those that tower above the competition. From action blockbusters to Hollywood classics, TV shows to 'toons, 2013 has been a standout year, but which soundtrack packed the greatest punch? Which hi-def transfer really dazzled? Which disc went the extra mile with extra features? All is revealed over the page...

Bond has never looked better than he does on Fox's Blu-ray release of *Skyfall*



BEST PICTURE QUALITY

WINNER

SKYFALL

20th Century Fox delivered one of the best hi-def encodes we've ever seen with its Blu-ray release of 007's latest mission. From the clandestinely inky blacks and sophisticated detailing to the glamorous primary colours on display throughout, *Skyfall*'s digital-to-digital AVC 2.40:1 1080p transfer provides a great showcase for the talents of your display. When it comes to picture quality, the *Skyfall* Blu-ray has a licence to thrill...



ALSO NOMINATED

PACIFIC RIM

Saturated colours, heavy blacks and meticulous detailing bring the film's action to life

THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

From the lush greens of the Shire to the dank goblin caves, this transfer never misses a beat

LIFE OF PI

Bright and vibrant, this disc's spectacular 1080p encode is prime demo material



BEST SFX

WINNER

PACIFIC RIM

This film pays homage to the Japanese *Godzilla* films, yet gone are the days of men in monster suits fighting each other. Instead, the wizards at Industrial Light & Magic created *Pacific Rim*'s enormous robots and monsters digitally for a cinematic spectacle like no other.

ALSO NOMINATED

LIFE OF PI

Rhythm & Hues VFX achieved the impossible with its digital tiger

STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS

Some of the finest CG starships the Federation has ever seen

THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

Digital creations that are just as 'human' as their live co-stars



BEST 3D BLU-RAY

WINNER

OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL 3D

The Land of Oz has never seemed grander or more magical than it does in this native stereoscopic presentation of Sam Raimi's *Wizard of Oz* prequel. So immersive and playful are the 3D effects that the 'flat' version seems much shallower and less enjoyable by comparison.

ALSO NOMINATED

DREDD 3D

Comic book icon lays down the law and demands to be seen in 3D

LIFE OF PI 3D

An aching beautiful example of stereoscopic artistry

THE GREAT GATSBY 3D

Sumptuous 3D thrills make this *Gatsby* more than merely 'great'

BEST PACKAGING

The Fall of the House of Usher steelbook



Given the glut of Blu-ray steelbooks that hit shop shelves in 2013, it takes something truly special to really make yours stand out from the crowd. That's just what Arrow Video did with its use of *The Fall of the House of Usher*'s original UK quad poster art splashed across the front of its Blu-ray steelbook, and the coffin-bound figure of Madeline Usher from the bottom of the US movie poster isolated in a sea of black on the reverse. An absolutely stunning example of how classic poster art can be made to work for modern packaging.



BEST REMASTER

WINNER

TIME BANDITS

If you think that film restoration projects are solely the preserve of major Hollywood studios with huge budgets, think again. Going back to the original 35mm camera negatives and undertaking an intensive frame-by-frame 2K restoration of the entire film, the team at Deluxe Production achieved sensational results for cult label Arrow Video's release of Terry Gilliam's fantasy flick.

ALSO NOMINATED

THE SERVANT

A superb transfer that brings out the best in the inventive imagery

THE FURY

Arrow Video does it again with this cult thriller

DOCTOR WHO: THE MIND OF EVIL

Painstaking work brings colour back to this classic serial



BEST DVD EXCLUSIVE

WINNER

DOCTOR WHO: THE MIND OF EVIL

Thanks to the hard work of the boffins at the Doctor Who Restoration Team and fan extraordinaire Stuart Humphryes, you can finally enjoy this serial in colour for the first time in decades. We can't think of a finer way of celebrating the sci-fi show's 50th anniversary.

ALSO NOMINATED

SIDE BY SIDE

This documentary about digital cinema is a must-see for any film fan

EVERYTHING OR NOTHING: THE UNTOLD STORY OF 007

As good a companion to your Bond Blu-rays as you could hope for

ROBIN REDBREAST

Loving restoration of a much-discussed but rarely seen *Play for Today*



BEST WORLD CINEMA

WINNER

NOSFERATU

Anyone who thinks that there's no place for silent films on Blu-ray needs to sit down with a copy of Eureka's beautiful Blu-ray restoration of F.W. Murnau's legendary 1922 German horror film. An experience every bit as spectacular as any contemporary blockbuster.

ALSO NOMINATED

RUST AND BONE

Award-winning French film receives a suitably stunning Blu-ray

ONIBABA

Eureka ensures that this classic horror is as beautiful as it is chilling

FROM UP ON POPPY HILL

It's easy to fall in love with Studio Ghibli's teenage romance



BEST TV BOXSET

WINNER

BREAKING BAD: THE FIFTH SEASON

It was a long time coming, but Sony Pictures finally saw fit to release the first five seasons of Vince Gilligan's hit crime drama on Blu-ray in the UK, just in time for newcomers to get hooked before the final episodes were aired. And while we loved them all, this two-disc set was the real highlight, with its impressive AV credentials and vast array of audio commentaries, featurettes and other bonus bits.

ALSO NOMINATED

GAME OF THRONES: SEASON TWO

HBO's fantasy saga continues to deliver the goods in hi-def

BANSHEE: SEASON ONE

A superior Blu-ray outing for the ultimate TV guilty pleasure

THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON THREE

A stunning boxset for the show's best season to date

BOOK OF THE YEAR

Star Wars: The Blueprints



Yes, we know – the idea of a book of technical illustrations and set blueprints for the *Star Wars* films sounds about as interesting as a Haynes manual for the Millennium Falcon. So we were shocked to discover just how utterly fascinating this enormous tome turned out to be. With only 62 of its 336 pages dedicated to the prequels, *Star Wars: The Blueprints* fills a vital gap in your understanding and appreciation of how the original trilogy was brought to the screen, and celebrates the work of these previously unsung heroes of the cinematic arts.

Oblivion takes aim at your system with an astonishingly dynamic DTS-HD MA 7.1 track



BEST AUDIO QUALITY

WINNER

OBLIVION

Despite its sci-fi trappings *Oblivion* is far from being a traditional genre blockbuster, yet it arrives on BD with a brilliantly immersive and powerful DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 soundtrack that stands out amongst the crowd. Fully deserving of the 'reference quality' accolade we gave it, this multi-layered lossless mix is both impeccably detailed and incredibly potent, seamlessly integrating every element into a dynamic 360-degree acoustic experience that begs to be played loud.



ALSO NOMINATED

FAST & FURIOUS 6

The thunderous roar of engines and screech of brakes has never sounded so inviting

SKYFALL

Gunfire, explosions and *that* iconic theme make for a sublime DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack

MAN OF STEEL

Subtlety goes out the window with a phenomenally powerful soundtrack that hits as hard as one of Supe's punches

The jungle is always jumping whenever these three get together...



BEST ANIMATION

WINNER

THE JUNGLE BOOK: DIAMOND EDITION

Disney's recent track record in the UK has been spotty at best where Blu-ray releases of its animated classics are concerned. This only serves to make its hi-def treatment of this beloved film all the more surprising. Beautifully restored and accompanied by a sympathetic DTS-HD MA 7.1 remix that really brings its toe-tapping tunes to life, this is easily the best *The Jungle Book* has ever looked or sounded. Add to that a bountiful supply of bonus goodies and you have a disc that no 'toon fan should be without.



ALSO NOMINATED

WRECK-IT RALPH 3D

There are plenty of AV highlights to be found in Disney's CG love letter to videogames

ARCHER: SEASON THREE

Fox may have kept UK fans waiting, but this third season of the spy spoof was the best yet

THE LITTLE MERMAID: DIAMOND EDITION

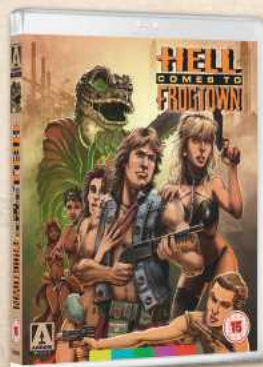
Another Disney crown jewel is given deluxe Blu-ray treatment in the UK. Let's hope there are plenty more to come in 2014



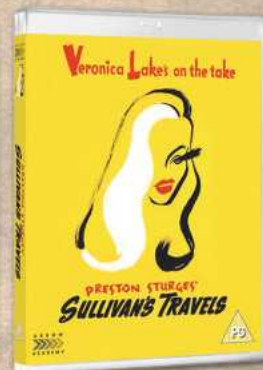
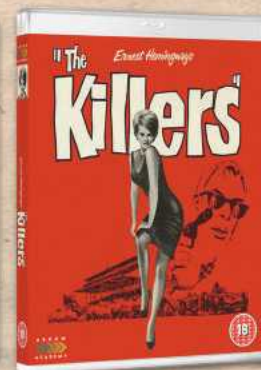
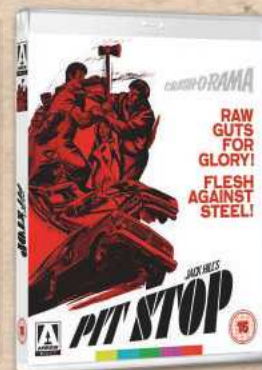
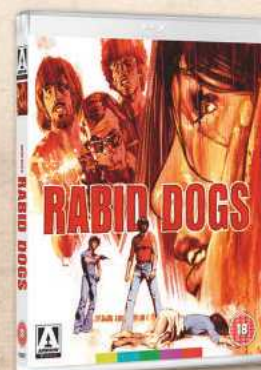
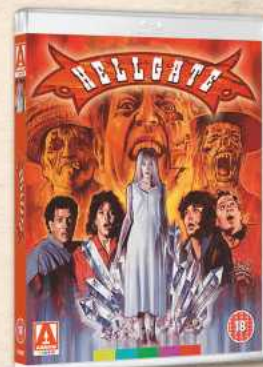
2014 PREVIEW



COMING TO DVD & BLU-RAY IN 2014

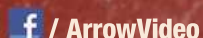


We had great fun bringing you great classic films on DVD and Blu-ray in 2013 and hope you have enjoyed them! In 2014 we continue our love for classic B-movie horror and continue to expand on the collections of some of our most celebrated auteurs including two from Tinto Brass, more from Brian De Palma and Mario Bava and our third Jack Hill-approved release for his most criminally underseen work, which also makes its UK debut. Two more making their debut are *Blind Woman's Curse*, a glorious Japansloitation mash-up of horror, yakuza and ghost story and *White of the Eye* from the celebrated Donald Cammell (*Performance*). Our Academy line adds two classic Hollywood films with a crime film from Don Siegel and comedy from Preston Sturges, both on Blu-ray for the first time in the world.



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BEST EXTRA

WINNER

CANNON FODDER: THE MAKING OF LIFEFORCE (LIFEFORCE)

This comprehensive 70-minute documentary provides a fascinating account of the difficult journey that Tobe Hooper's sci-fi flop *LifeForce* endured to get from the page to the bigscreen. From drugs to, erm, pubic hair, no aspect of the production is left untouched...

ALSO NOMINATED

THE APPENDICES: PARTS 7 & 8 (THE HOBBIT... EXTENDED EDITION)

Everything you could ever need to know about the making of the film

DIRECTOR AND CAST COMMENTARY (NOWHERE)

How this chat-track ever got past the lawyers we'll never know

PICTURE-IN-PICTURE: EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT (ARGO)

The story behind the film from the real survivors of the hostage crisis



BEST DEMO

WINNER

TANK CHASE (FAST & FURIOUS 6)

This action franchise certainly lives up to its name with this over-the-top car chase. The fast-paced AVC 2.40:1 1080p visuals will push your screen to the limits of its abilities, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix serves up an aural assault guaranteed to get your motor running.

ALSO NOMINATED

SMALLVILLE SHOWDOWN (MAN OF STEEL)

This sequence's DTS-HD MA 7.1 sonics are simply mind-blowing

GOING UNDERGROUND (SKYFALL)

Now we know what it sounds like to have a train dropped on our heads

TWISTER TROUBLE (OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL 3D)

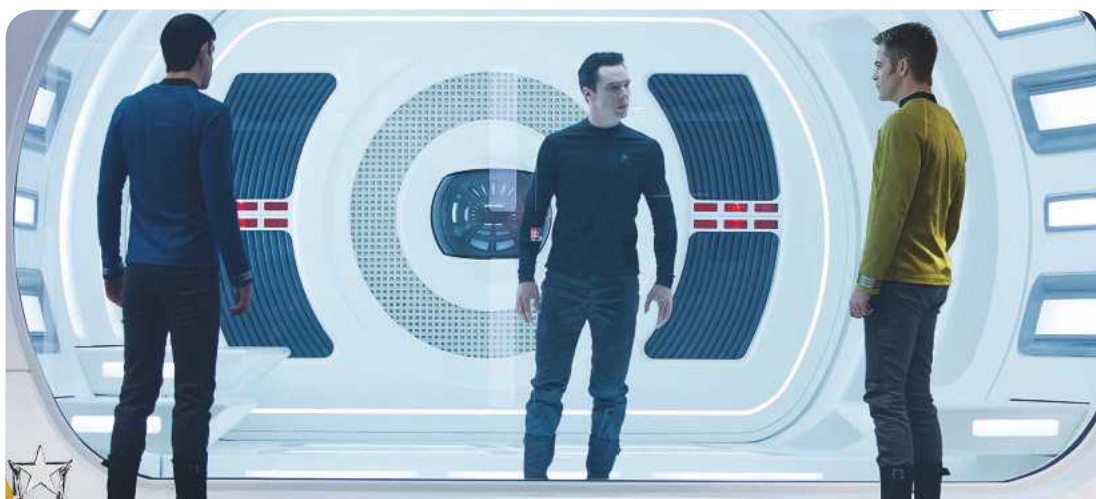
Eye-popping stereoscopic effects abound in this terrific 3D scene

'EWW!' OF THE YEAR

Totem Pole of the Dead (Hannibal: Season One)



From a body artistically mounted on a deer's antlers to a musician turned into a human cello, there's no end to the variety and inventiveness of murders featured in this grisly-yet-stylish TV take on Thomas Harris' iconic serial killer. However, it's the ninth episode (*Trou Normand*) that sticks in the mind thanks to its totem pole constructed from unfortunate victims. Not the most tasteful piece of public art, but it definitely makes quite an impression...



DISC FAIL

WINNER

STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS

Never before has one studio gone out of its way to alienate a franchise's core fanbase as surely as Paramount did with its handling of the latest *Star Trek* sequel. While it produced plenty of *Making of...* featurettes to support the film, deciding to spread them across numerous retailer exclusives meant that fans would have to buy multiple Blu-rays to get them all. And don't get us started on making the film's 'Enhanced Commentary' only available through iTunes...

ALSO NOMINATED

PLEIN SOLEIL

Why bother with a 4K restoration if you're going to slather it in DNR?

PASSION

Interest in De Palma's films is at a new high, so why no BD release?

MAN OF STEEL

Making the best extra exclusive to UV in the UK is anything but super



BEST FIGHT

WINNER

SUPERMAN VS ZOD (MAN OF STEEL)

Surrounded by the ruins of Metropolis, Superman and General Zod do their level best to make sure that there's not a single building left standing as they come to blows in a spectacular scrap ripped straight out of the pages of the most action-packed comic book.

ALSO NOMINATED

TORRETTO & HOBBS VS SHAW & KLAUS (FAST & FURIOUS 6)

The most testosterone-soaked brawl in the history of cinema

GIPSY DANGER VS OTACHI (PACIFIC RIM)

A giant robot uses a ship as a baseball bat to hit a monster. Brilliant.

JAMES BONOMO VS KEEGAN (BULLET TO THE HEAD)

This axe-cellent showdown is like living the 1980s all over again



BEST COMEDY

WINNER

SIGHTSEERS

Rising star Ben Wheatley takes aim at the blandness of middle-England with this acutely British answer to Bonnie and Clyde. Part road-trip, part social satire, comedy is rarely ever this weird, this bleak or this funny.

ALSO NOMINATED

SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS

Self-aware mix of laughs and violence from the writer of *In Bruges*

THIS IS THE END

A crass, puerile and surprisingly savvy critique of celebrity

PITCH PERFECT

This is what *Glee* wants to be when it finally grows up



BEST GAME

WINNER

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Rockstar's latest crime epic takes the best bits from *Heat*, *Goodfellas*, *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, adds a dash of automotive mayhem and then unleashes the results on 49 square miles of game world. Not just the best game of the year, *GTA V* is the best game of its generation

ALSO NOMINATED

TOMB RAIDER

Lara Croft takes back the action-adventure crown in this reboot

BIOSHOCK: INFINITE

How many other shooters mix firepower with philosophy?

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US

DC superheroes go head-to-head in this beat 'em up



ICON OF THE YEAR

WINNER

PETER JACKSON

The fan-favourite filmmaker continues to push at the boundaries of cinema with his pioneering use of 48fps HFR (High Frame Rate) cinematography and remains committed to feature-packed Blu-ray releases – as proven by the recent Extended Edition of *The Hobbit*.

ALSO NOMINATED

JAMES WHITE

The restoration guru who helped transform Arrow Video's fortunes

GUILLERMO DEL TORO

Cult filmmaker ensures his discs are loaded with bonus goodies

JUSTIN LIN

Hollywood's premiere action director keeps on delivering AV thrills

Cult horror movies remain a staple of the Arrow catalogue



Arrow delivered an extras-packed Blu-ray release of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*



Blaxploitation classic *Foxy Brown* was among the titles Arrow licenced in 2013

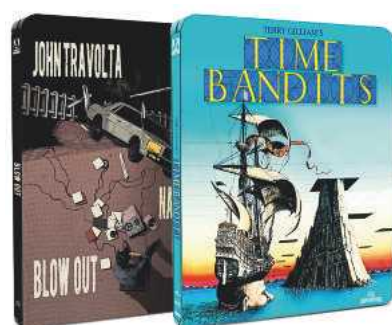


LABEL OF THE YEAR

WINNER

ARROW VIDEO

The past year has seen this cult UK label undergo a radical reinvention. In addition to offering an even wider range of titles than ever before



thanks to new licensing deals with several Hollywood majors, Arrow also made a new commitment to quality by bringing film restoration maestro James White on board to supervise its releases. And with more cult favourites already confirmed for 2014, it's possible that the best is yet to come...

ALSO NOMINATED

EUREKA: THE MASTERS OF CINEMA SERIES

Fewer 'big name' releases in 2013 couldn't stop Eureka from wowing us all over again

SECOND SIGHT

From AV quality to extras, this indie clearly takes great pride in every aspect of its releases

WARNER HOME VIDEO

From modern blockbusters to TV shows and restored classics, Warner's commitment to BD puts other studios to shame

'You'll be using this Blu-ray to showcase your system for some time to come'



DISC OF THE YEAR

WINNER

SKYFALL

After *Quantum of Solace*, Bond needed to pull something really special out of his bag of gadgets for his 50th anniversary outing. Thankfully, this celebration of all-things-007 was more than up to the task and (as shown by the fact that it scooped our award for Best Picture Quality) the superior AV ensures that you'll be using this Blu-ray to showcase your cinema system for some time to come.

ALSO NOMINATED

FAST & FURIOUS 6

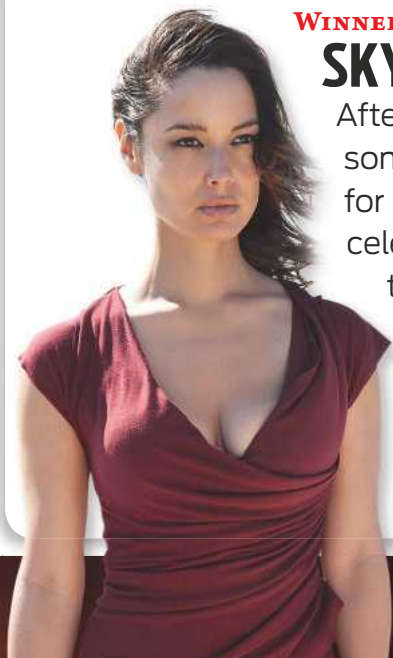
The fast car franchise continues to fire on all cylinders with this disc's superb AV credentials

OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL 3D

This stunning fantasy film sets a new benchmark for 3D Blu-ray

THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE 2

Bursting with extras – including two early Tobe Hooper films – this is the definitive HD set for this slice 'n' dice sequel



Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

“ Home cinema
so good you'll believe
you're there! ”



Selecting and installing home cinema on a DIY basis may leave the system performing at way below its optimum level.

Confused ?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top20 AV shops in the country

SOUTH

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street.
01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.co.uk

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street.
01628 633995
www.audiovenue.co.uk

Norwich

MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street.
01603 627134
www.martinhifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street.
01268 779762

CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.co.uk

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road.
01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.co.uk

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street.
020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.co.uk

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road.
020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street.
024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way.
0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

NORTH

York

SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate.
01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

www.top20uk.info



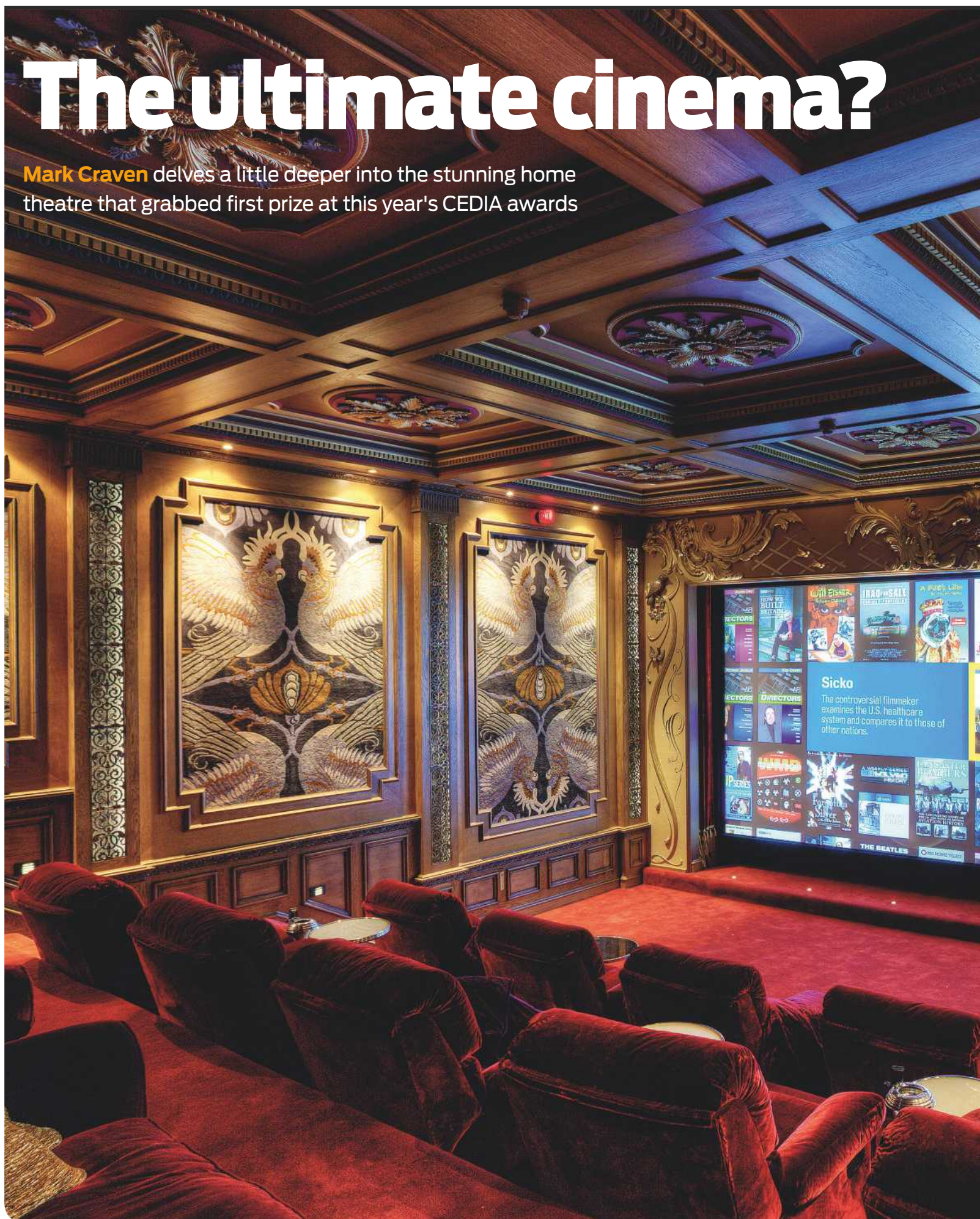
STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
SERVICE ★★★★★
FACILITIES ★★★★★
VERDICT ★★★★★

...Talk to the experts

The ultimate cinema?

Mark Craven delves a little deeper into the stunning home theatre that grabbed first prize at this year's CEDIA awards





ONE INSTALLATION THAT really stood out from this year's CEDIA awards was the joint-winner in the Best Home Cinema Over £100,000 category, not only for its reference-level AV but its lavish design. We loved it so much we've gone back to the company responsible, Imagine This, to find out more about the room build, the tech used, and how the project came about.

'We were contacted in 2010 by the representative of a private client, who asked us to become involved in a project to create a luxury screening room,' explains Imagine This's Guy Singleton. 'They were aware of us from our success in previous CEDIA awards and as HCC's Installer of the Year.'

'The private client was a person with a very practical understanding of the technical aspects and deliverables of a screening room. It was very clear that they wanted this screening room to perform at the highest technical level, and to be suitable for use by the family and visiting friends. Visitors would need the control of the room to be intuitive and automated, whilst the client would need manual control of all technical elements.'

In other words, this screening room would need to outperform all others.

Putting the system together

The room required largescreen HD projection, with Blu-ray, DVD and gaming capability. The owner already had a video server in the main part of the house which would need to be expanded upon and improved.

The brief was outlined at the beginning, but evolved over the course of the project. Imagine This provided initial designs, before moving on through CAD drawings, mood boards and 3D models including wireframe images, renders and a full-motion video. Technical planning included an audio evaluation using professional software, calculations to determine the optimum size and placement of the projection screen using guidelines from Imaging Science Foundation, and electronics design covering areas such as the connection of equipment, the control system architecture and the planning of equipment racks.

Once this had all been approved it was time to bring in the kit. In order to achieve THX Reference level performance in such a large room, Imagine This used products from Procella's range of THX approved loudspeakers. At the front, balanced active P815 bi-amplified loudspeakers were mounted in the baffle wall, which was constructed to enhance their output. The rear sound array consisted of six passive Procella P8s.

'In order to deal with MSV [mean spatial variants], wave collisions, standing waves and nulls, we installed two Procella P18 high-output subwoofers into the baffle wall,' adds Guy. Amplification and processing came from Anthem.

The immense 260in screen was specially constructed by Screen Research for this project. 'Our client had indicated that the projection screen should be as large as possible,' explains the installer. 'We selected an ISF and THX-approved acoustically transparent fabric, a 2.40:1 aspect ratio and vertical motorised masking. We used this, in conjunction with the intelligent lens system and digital crop files on the projector, and saved a variety of presets, so that our client could enjoy content in a diversity of ratios; 2.40:1, 1.78:1 and 1.33:1.' A Christie projector, with an incredible 12,000 Lumens brightness, was chosen to provide the visuals.

'Even the control system uses a custom-designed GUI that matches the room's aesthetics'

The video sources included a networked movie server to manage the extensive film collection, an Apple TV with network attached storage, two Blu-ray players, Sky TV, an Xbox and the ability to stream content direct from the client's iPad.

Acoustic treatments for the space included the use of green glue and absorption, reflection, diffusion and bass management materials from RPG Europe. 'Our acoustic analysis pre-treatment predicted that the mid- and high-frequency response of the room would be very poor and the room model exhibited bad separation of the modes between 80Hz and 150Hz,' Guy reveals. 'By using the acoustic treatments, we greatly improved modal response, and pressure was more evenly distributed, giving a better sound overall.'

The devil is in the detail

There's so much more to this system than the hardware, of course. For the opulent décor, Imagine This sourced reclaimed oak panelling, as the client had expressed a strong preference for authentic materials. They also designed bespoke seating that went into production especially for the project. In fact, artisan cabinetmakers, decorative plasterwork specialists, theatrical curtain makers and bespoke carpet manufacturers were all employed to bring all of the elements of the theatre together. Even the control system, based on Crestron hardware, uses a custom-designed GUI that takes visual elements from the room's aesthetic design to ensure it feels like a natural part of the experience.

Imagine This tells HCC that it's 'very proud' to have been a part of this install, and it's easy to see why. We just wish it was ours! ■



Comfort and style were key parts of the brief



Kit is racked in a separate air-conditioned room



The giant 260in screen sits behind an authentic theatrical curtain

Serious Home Cinema



demands some Serious AV Separates



Pioneer
BDP-160
Blu-ray Player
and SC LX57
AV Receiver

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2012-2013
HT RECEIVER
Pioneer VSX-922

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2011-2012
5.1 LOUDSPEAKERS SYSTEM
KEF T205

HOME CINEMA
2011 AWARD
WINNER

HOME CINEMA
BEST BUY

KEF
INNOVATORS IN SOUND
T205 Speaker
System



If you're serious about your Home Entertainment, make sure you consult a dealer who really understands the latest products, who can demonstrate equipment properly and help you select what's right for your home and budget, whether it's big or small.

With fully-featured demo rooms in both of our stores, we can show you what great Home Cinema can look and sound like – like these amazing separates from Pioneer and KEF.

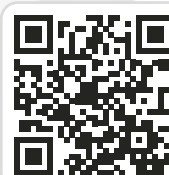
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REVIEWS

→ **THE BEST OF 2013** AV RECEIVERS, AMPS AND PROCESSORS Sony, Denon, Yamaha, Onkyo, Arcam, Marantz and Krell **LOUDSPEAKERS** KEF, Tannoy, Wharfedale, DALI and Acoustic Energy **PROJECTORS** JVC, Epson, Sony, Optoma and BENQ **TVs** Panasonic, Samsung and Sony **SOUNDBARS** Philips, B&W and Monitor Audio **PLUS** All-in-one systems, BD decks, subwoofers, accessories and more!



Epic movie

Does DALI's Epicon 5.1 array justify its £17,000 asking price? Find out on p62

HCC RATINGS KEY...	
Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices shown on reviews are original RRP and may have changed



A console with gaming in its heart

Sony's PlayStation 4 is a powerful next-gen console suited to joystick junkies. Yet **Guy Cocker** wonders if it should be something more than that

JUDGED AGAINST EARLIER

PlayStation consoles, the PlayStation 3 was a pretty big failure for manufacturer Sony.

Sure, it was a great Blu-ray player and hosted amazing exclusives like *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, *LittleBigPlanet* and *The Last of Us*. But the PS3 suffered more than its fair share of problems – a delayed launch, a poor controller, and a catastrophic network attack in 2011. The result: the PlayStation 3 has only sold 80m consoles to date, which may be neck-and-neck with the Xbox 360, but way short of the PS2's 155m total lifetime sales.

With the PlayStation 4, Sony therefore has to pull out all the stops to regain its dominance. On paper, the PlayStation 4 is a bold statement of intent that addresses pretty much every possible complaint about its predecessor. It incorporates a PC-style architecture, which means it's far easier for developers to make games for. It uses an established disc format – the seven year-old Blu-ray – which has helped keep the launch price low at £349. It incorporates fast GDDR memory to give it a significant performance boost over Microsoft's Xbox One rival. And it boasts a new controller (only one supplied) with improved triggers and thumbsticks to make it better for traditional genres such as shooters.

For better or worse, then, the PlayStation 4 is a system that's focused on the best gaming experience possible. If you're a gamer, you'll find that it really, truly delivers in this regard, producing games that are both visually incredible and great fun to play. If you're looking for more of a well-rounded multimedia device, you're going to be a lot more disappointed. Put simply, in every area that isn't gaming, the PS4 lags significantly behind the PS3.

'The PS4 certainly delivers the visual punch you'd hope for when investing in new hardware'

Style icon

The PS4 could well be the most stylish piece of consumer electronics that Sony has ever made. It's small – roughly the same size as the PlayStation 3 Slim, and only a little bit bigger than the Xbox 360 Slim. It's stylish, with matte and gloss finishes that combine into a slanted design that makes it look like the console was caught in a wind tunnel (which is a good look, as it turns out). It's practical – weighing less than 3kg – and there's no external power brick, so it's incredibly portable.

With the PS4, Sony has entered the all-digital world, with analogue outputs now

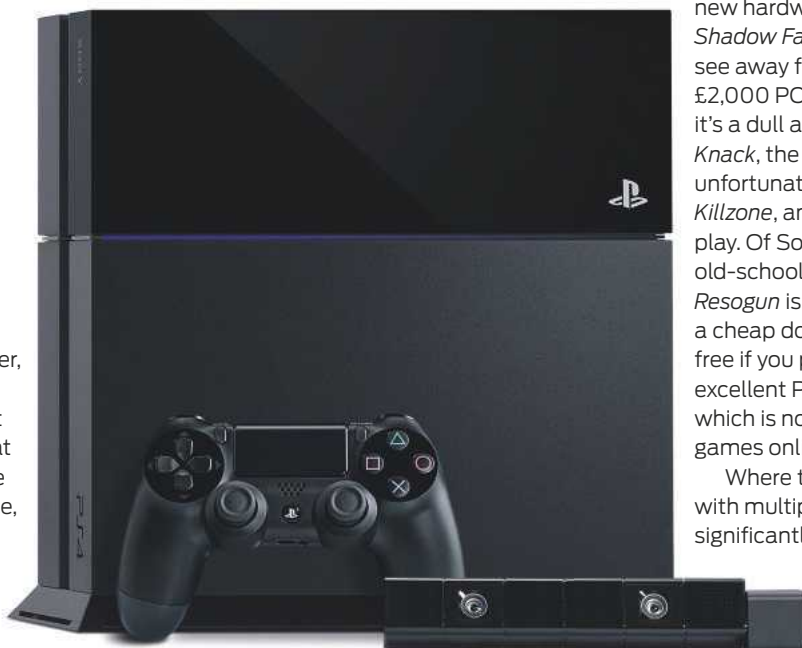
a thing of the past. On the rear of the machine there's HDMI, optical audio, a wired network interface, and a special port for connecting the PlayStation Eye camera, which costs an extra £50. There are also two USB 3.0 ports on the front for connecting devices, but they'll mostly be used for charging the DualShock 4 controller over micro-USB. Thankfully, all the cables you need are included in the box.

As nicely designed as the console is (and that includes the lightning-fast revamped GUI), the real star of the show is the new DualShock 4 controller, which is a superb upgrade over its flawed predecessor. The L2 and R2 triggers are the big improvement here, as their concave shape makes them way more comfortable for shooters and racing games. The thumbsticks are also much more comfortable and precise, the underside of the pad is more grippy, and a light along the top can be tracked by the camera for built-in motion controls.

The PlayStation 4 also delivers the visual punch you'd hope for when investing in

new hardware. First-party title *Killzone: Shadow Fall* is the prettiest game you'll see away from *Crysis 3* running on a £2,000 PC – it's just a shame that it's a dull and repetitive shooter to play. *Knack*, the other big PS4 exclusive, is unfortunately way less glamorous than *Killzone*, and even more uninspiring to play. Of Sony's first-party games, old-school side-scrolling shooter *Resogun* is actually the best, and is a cheap downloadable title to buy, or free if you pay £40 a year for Sony's excellent PlayStation Plus subscription, which is now also a requirement to play games online.

Where the hardware really shines is with multiplatform releases, which look significantly better on the PS4 than they >



The PS4 camera will cost you an extra £50

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
High-power games console/BD player

POSITION:
Sony's newest, and most potent, console

PEERS:
Microsoft Xbox One

The PS4's disc tray is a slot-loader, tucked into the unit's middle groove



do on the Xbox One. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, *Battlefield 4* and *Call of Duty Ghosts* all run at Full HD 1080p resolution on Sony's hardware, whereas they run at lower resolutions on Microsoft's machine. The key to this discrepancy, at least according to developers, is the Sony's incredibly generous 8GB GDDR memory allocation, which makes it a significantly more powerful gaming system

'This is a technical powerhouse that's focused on delivering the best gaming experience around'

overall. While the gap will no doubt get closer between the two consoles over time, it's safe to say that the best versions of cross-platform releases will be on the PS4.

Sparse selection

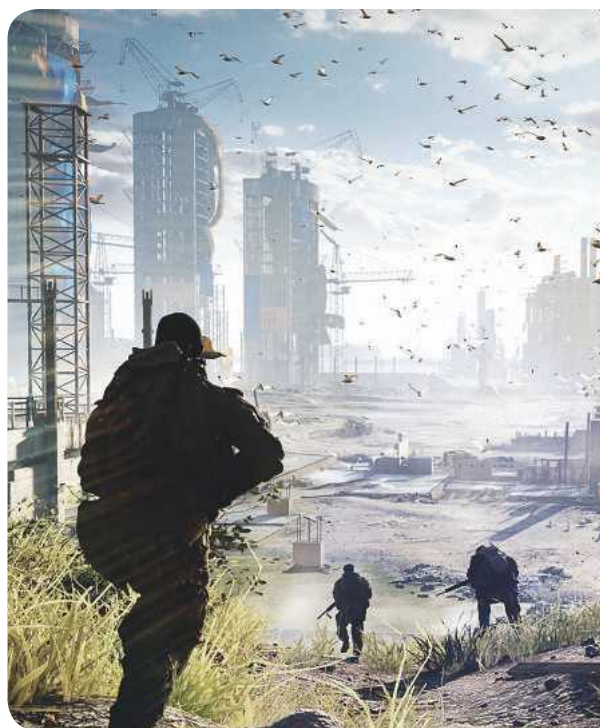
Where the PS4 succeeds as a gaming machine though, it fails spectacularly as a general multimedia device. There are only four media apps at launch – BBC iPlayer, BBC Sport, Demand 5 and IGN. This is extremely limited compared to the PlayStation 3, which offers a host of streaming services such as LoveFilm, NOW TV, Netflix, ITV Player, 4OD, and a whole lot more. More may have arrived when you read this, though. Sony's PlayTV digital terrestrial receiver won't work on the PS4 either, and unlike the Xbox One, you can't connect a TV receiver through the console.

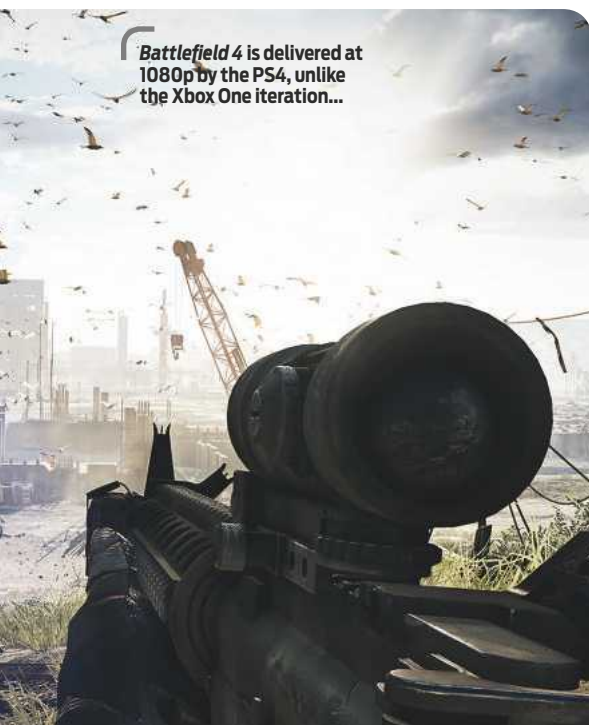
General multimedia playback from local sources is equally limited. There's no DLNA support for playing files from a computer or NAS drive located on your network. Plugging in memory sticks, hard drives or any other external media does nothing – even Sony's own cameras are completely ignored by its next-generation console. Nor will the machine play MP3 files, so you can't create custom soundtracks for your games. All of these features were standard on the PlayStation 3 predecessor and while it's possible they'll be added to the PlayStation 4 at some point in the future, it's a pretty sad state of affairs at launch.

Blu-ray playback is similarly disappointing. The console will play Blu-ray and DVD discs

once you've downloaded a 300MB day-one patch, but it won't support 3D Blu-ray titles or – very oddly – CDs. Blu-ray playback was comparable to the PS3 in terms of audio and visual quality, but it was slower to skip chapters, and I encountered a couple of system freezes when watching *Star Trek Into Darkness*. The system also doesn't include an infrared sensor for universal remotes, nor does it support the PS3 Bluetooth Blu-ray remote or Logitech's PlayStation 3 Bluetooth Harmony adapter, although there's a chance Bluetooth devices could be supported via a software update in future. The only good thing we can say about the PS4 as a Blu-ray player is that it supports DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1. For now though, it's clear Sony sees the PS4 as a games console rather than a media player.

If you're looking to buy a PlayStation 4, there are a couple of accessories that you might want to budget in as well. It's relatively easy to replace the included 500GB hard drive with a larger laptop hard drive or, if you really want to enjoy the best PS4 experience,





Battlefield 4 is delivered at 1080p by the PS4, unlike the Xbox One iteration...



Connectivity includes an HDMI socket, capable of outputting 1080p

a solid state drive. The issue with the latter is that all PS4 games have to be installed in order to play – *Killzone: Shadow Fall* alone is 38.2GB, for example. I'd also recommend a decent gaming headset as the mono headphone and mic included with the console is awful – the Turtle Beach XP510s are a good choice as they're wireless, work with all other consoles and support Dolby Digital. The PlayStation Vita is also a worthwhile purchase alongside the PS4, as it allows you to stream your PS4 games while someone else is using the TV.

Lacklustre at launch?

Sony is advertising the PlayStation 4 under the slogan 'This is for the Players', and judged on the launch functionality, it's difficult to argue with that statement. This is a technical powerhouse that's focused on delivering the best gaming experience possible. It's clear that anything that interfered with that goal was omitted at launch, hopefully to be unlocked via software updates at a later stage. At launch though, the PlayStation 4 is unsuitable for use as your main multimedia playback device, falling way behind dedicated Blu-ray players, multimedia devices and even the PlayStation 3 in this regard.

If you're looking for a cutting-edge gaming experience then I'd choose the PlayStation 4 over the Xbox One, based on its better visual punch, but if you're looking for a more rounded entertainment system, Microsoft's new console (which we'll be reviewing in a forthcoming issue), edges it out thanks to superior (as in fully-functional) Blu-ray playback, Kinect functionality, and support for an external TV receiver. You might even consider waiting – the last generation of consoles offer vastly superior entertainment options, a much bigger library of games and will continue to get big upcoming titles like *Watch Dogs* and *Titanfall* – just in slightly less beautiful form.

If Sony's previous history is anything to go by, the PlayStation 4 will receive numerous over-the-air updates that will improve its all-round functionality (and it has said that 4K gaming is under consideration, although the console is at the time of writing restricted to a 1080p output). So even if you don't rush out and buy it now, it's definitely worth keeping an eye on ■

ON THE MENU

→ The PS4 takes Sony's long-running XMB interface and revamps it, with menu options leaping out at you as you prowls around (left) and plenty of emphasis on social integration. It's fast, intuitive and a cut above the UIs of most AV hardware

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: Yes. 500GB, user removable
CONNECTIONS: 1 x HDMI output; 1 x optical audio output; 2 x USB 3.0; 1 x AUX; Ethernet
DIMENSIONS: 275(w) x 53(h) x 305(d)mm
WEIGHT: 2.8kg
FEATURES: Blu-ray (not 3D) and DVD playback; single-chip custom processor; AMD next-generation Radeon™ based graphics engine; 8GB GDDR memory; supplied with DualShock 4 wireless controller, mono headset, HDMI cable and USB cable; built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth; Remote Play with PlayStation Vita; compatible with optional PS4 camera; BBC iPlayer, BBC Sport, Demand 5 and IGN apps from launch; Sony Entertainment Network

HCC VERDICT



Sony PlayStation 4

→ £350 Approx → <http://uk.playstation.com>
 → Tel: 0844 736 0595

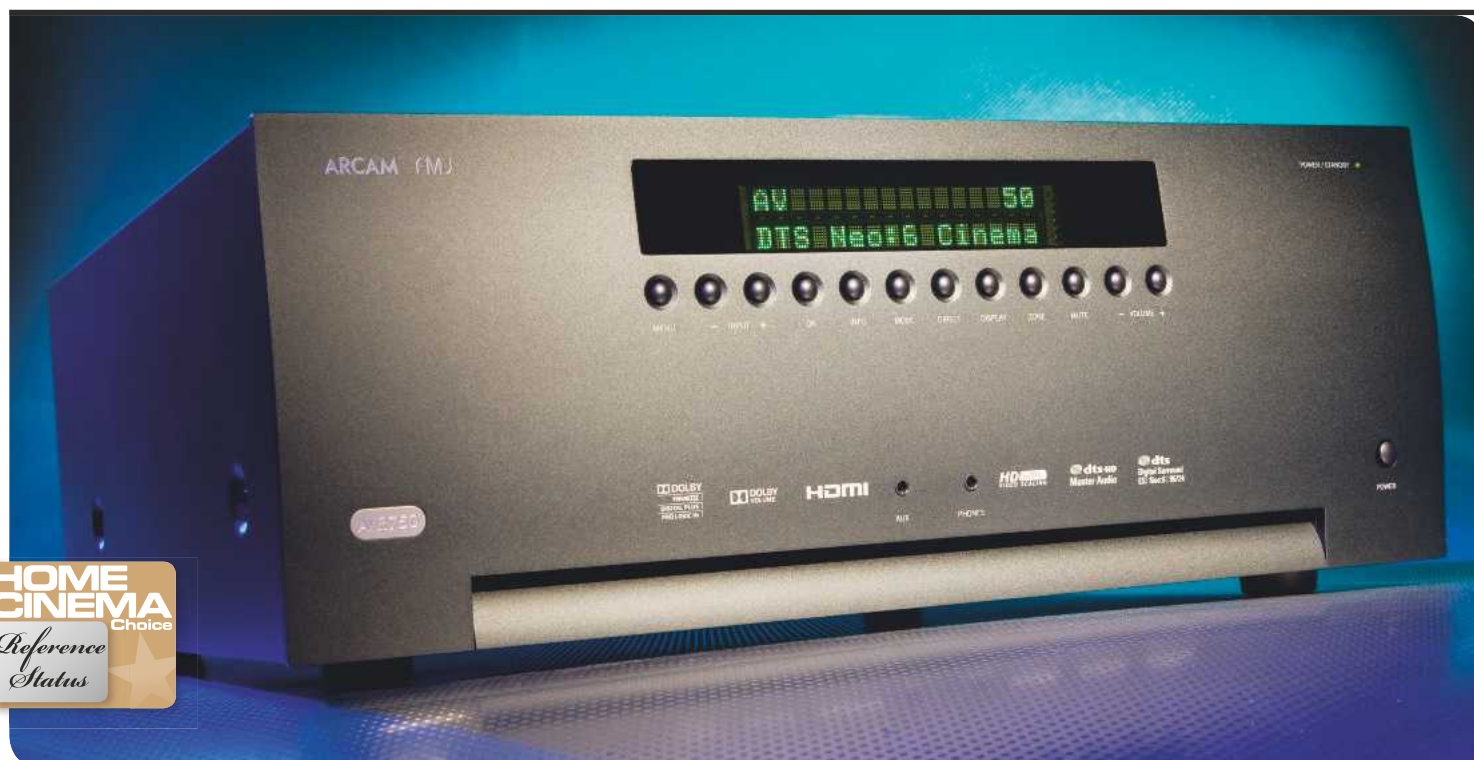
HIGHS: Incredibly powerful; good value; sleek design; great controller; PlayStation Plus offering; easily replaceable hard drive
LOWS: Poor Blu-ray functionality; limited number of media apps; no 4K support; no remote control support

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Promising the best of both worlds

Arcam's top-of-the-range AVR features the performance skills to make the most of music and movies. **Steve May** salutes the brand's return to the high-end

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
High-end seven-channel AV receiver

POSITION:
Arcam's flagship integrated AV product

PEERS:
Onkyo TX-NR5010;
Denon AVR-4520;
Yamaha CX-A5000/
MX-A5000

IT'S PROBABLY FAIR to say that Arcam doesn't rush its AV receivers to market. It's been four years since the launch of the brand's last flagship, the AVR600, which in the world of consumer electronics is something of an age. At least the brand doesn't undersell them when they arrive. The AVR750, it says, is not just the finest home cinema receiver it's ever made – it's also the best-sounding stereo amplifier, too. Quite a claim, and the boffins from Cambridge may well be right.

Certainly this new AVR is a powerful vindication of the company's philosophy that there needn't be an unbridgeable divide between two-channel and multichannel entertainment. Whether playing Lou Reed's *Transformer* or Michael Bay's *Transformers*, there's an authority to this amplifier that's deeply reassuring. But there's also a conservatism to the feature specification that may well disappoint badge-hunters.

Arcam's a very different company now to what it was when it first released the AVR600. The brand has shifted manufacturing from the UK, and found a new lease of life via its series of new media accessories. Both impact the AVR750 in different ways. Back in the day, Arcam receivers were just a little bit cranky, which set them apart from their mainstream competition just as surely as their sonic attributes. That eccentricity has been ironed out of the AVR750; it feels altogether more polished and refined and is a much smoother component to drive. The Arcam behaves much as you'd expect it to, while the clear-cut specification makes it a supremely easy AVR to install and tune.

In terms of design, this newcomer is just beautiful. Its clean lines and dark-grey bodywork reflect the familiar FMJ aesthetic. At 16.7kg, the model also exhibits serious heft. The neatly laid-out rear panel is as generous as it is clean. There are seven HDMI inputs and

two outputs, both of which are ARC (Audio Return Channel) compatible. Curiously, one of the inputs is labelled VCR, which is clearly a little ridiculous.

The receiver is a seven-channel design, using multi-voltage Class G amplification. It can be configured as a full 7.1 system, or as 5.1 with two channels serving a second zone. Alternatively, users can opt to bi-amp the front stereo pair in 5.1. For this review, the AVR750 was run in its 7.1 configuration.

Network entertainment is delivered via an Ethernet input; there's also a rear-mounted USB, which when the HDMI inputs are populated becomes virtually unusable. External control support includes RS232, plus 12V and IR triggers, which can automatically switch on connected kit.

Revamped electronics

While some elements of the AVR750 recall its antecedents, there have been big changes beneath the hood. The entire HDMI and video processing stage is new, sourced from Analog Devices. This is quite a change from its predecessor, which featured software specifically written in-house by Arcam. Unfortunately, that bravery led to a number of reliability issues. In comparison, this platform

'There's no escaping the fact that Arcam's flagship AVR750 is a magnificent-sounding AV receiver'

appears bulletproof. The receiver's video switching time has improved, too, and the AVR basically handshakes with every hot plug as soon as it's powered up, which dramatically improves overall slickness and usability. All sources can be upscaled to 4K resolution.

The Arcam ships with an Auto Speaker setup calibration mic, which performs the usual enclosure measurements and room EQ sleight of hand. You can elect to manually select which inputs benefit from this equalisation – ideal if you prefer certain sources uncoloured. While I preferred the AVR750 sans EQ in two-channel mode, this calibration certainly helped multichannel material. The routine takes a little longer to complete than rival systems, but positional accuracy is very good. Inevitably, though, some further tweaking was done to get the most agreeable sound balance.

The AVR750 is networked for audio, offering playback from uPnP-enabled devices, as well as internet radio via vTuner. Media compatibility is standard, with MP3, WMA, WAV, FLAC and M4A/AAC files all playing from both USB and across a network from a NAS.

There's no album art support, though. There's no screensaver mode, either – so plasma owners beware.

Two-channel titan

In audiophile guise, Stereo Direct is the way to go. This bypasses all processing and circumnavigates surround effects. As there's no bass management, nothing is directed to the subwoofer channel. The resulting two-channel performance is positively seductive, with a wide, deep soundstage. Arcam makes no bones about the fact that this receiver has been engineered first and foremost to convey believable music, confident that once that's achieved all other aspects will fall into place.

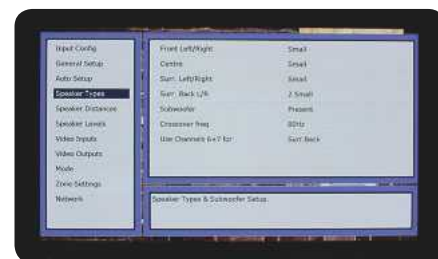
The AVR750 sounds similarly glorious with multichannel music (EQ employed). Kosuke Yamashita's *The Earth Overture* in 192kHz/24-bit 7.1 Linear PCM is suitably grandiose.

Of course, AV-Holics might be forgiven for thinking that any AVR whose DNA was forged in a musical furnace will sound fey and gutless with ballsy action fare. However, this Arcam will prove them wrong. The AVR750 is brawnier than a pumped-up Sylvester Stallone – an analogy given credence by the lengthy pre-credit sequence in *The Expendables 2*. The AVR750 delivers the magnificent chaos of this madcap 7.1 DTS-HD Master Audio mix without the vaguest hint of exhaustion. As Sly's Bad Attitude convoy blasts through the Nepalese compound, the receiver disgorges ordnance and falling masonry with huge dynamics. The wraparound imaging is fast and furious, with dialogue cleanly delineated (no mean feat given the scenery-chewing cast). It's all breathlessly exciting. There's a temptation with the AVR750 to see just how far you can push its reserves, but in anything other than a theatre-sized space you'll hit the pain threshold before the receiver squirms.

The AVR750 doesn't feature an overabundance of multichannel processing modes. Codec support covers the basics – Dolby TrueHD, Dolby Digital Plus and Pro-Logic IIx, along with DTS-HD MA and DTS-ES 6.1. Arcam's top-flight receiver holds no truck with height or width processing (hardly surprising considering it only offers seven channels) nor any of the virtual science proffered by the likes of Sony's STR-DA5800ES. This is very much a classical AV package. That's not to say fun can't be had with some of the Arcam's old-school modes. With genuine 7.1 mixes still in short supply, Dolby Digital EX works well in fleshing out the surround with 5.1 sources.

There is no escaping the fact that Arcam's AVR750 is a magnificent-sounding AV receiver. Easily the most accomplished AVR from the brand to date, it's effortlessly confident with multichannel and is a luxurious two-channel listen as well. While operational niceties such as HDMI passthrough and GUI flourishes have been ignored, the audio side hasn't... ■

ON THE MENU



→ The Arcam features a no-nonsense, straightforward user interface, borrowed from its AVR600 predecessor but now faster to browse

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. Plus Dolby Digital EX; Dolby Pro-Logic IIx

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. Plus DTS-ES 6.1 Discrete; DTS-ES 6.1 Matrix

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 100W

MULTIROOM: Yes. Second zone, analogue audio/video

AV INPUTS: 4 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical; 2 x coaxial)

HDMI: Yes. 7 x inputs; 2 x outputs

COMPONENT VIDEO: 3 x inputs

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

DIMENSIONS: 433(w) x 425(d) x 171(h)mm

WEIGHT: 16.7kg

ALSO FEATURING: Ethernet; USB; vTuner 'net radio; AM/FM radio; Auto Speaker Calibration; RS232; 12V trigger; learning backlit remote control; Class G amplification; 7.1-channel pre-outs; free iPad remote app; 4K and 3D passthrough; media file playback via USB or network; Stereo Direct mode

HCC VERDICT



Arcam FMJ AVR750

→ £4,000 Approx → www.arcam.co.uk
→ Tel: 01223 203200

HIGHS: Marvellous sound quality with wonderful clarity and huge dynamics; simple to set up and use; sturdy build quality

LOWS: No HDMI passthrough; no integrated web services beyond vTuner; USB port is awkward to access; silly VCR input label

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Smoothly does it

This seven-channel processor offers a high-end audio performance and sumptuous design and build – so **Richard Stevenson** thinks it's excellent value for money, even at £6,500



THE FOUNDATION PROCESSOR might be Krell's entry-level device but it has spectacular presence on the rack. The fascia is gloriously textured satin black with bright metallic silver in the central portion and, powered up, the menacing red glow from behind the curved logo plate turns bright blue.

The rear panel is arguably even more appealing. There are no less than nine v1.4 HDMI inputs, plus fully-balanced XLR outputs for seven channels and two subwoofers, comprehensive trigger ports and plenty of analogue inputs. A tenth HDMI input graces the front panel, and all boast Krell's Intelligent HDMI switching. This memorises HDMI sources, including handshaking and resolution information, making swapping between inputs instantaneous and without the few seconds of blank screen most AVRs require to re-sync to a new HDMI source.

The Foundation is feature-lite. It doesn't boast THX post-processing, upscaling, Smart networking features, USB inputs, media streaming, video tweakery or height and width channels. Yet the key performance parts are all present and correct. The huge power supplies, 32-bit DSPs, 32-bit Sabre DACs and high-end analogue output stages are the stuff of audiophile dreams.

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Seven-channel AV processor

POSITION: Krell's entry-level separate, below the S-1200U

PEERS: Yamaha CX-A5000; Primare SP33; Marantz AV8801

Set up was a little frustrating. The two-line display makes navigating the menus a challenge and engaging the auto setup and Krell's Automatic Room Equalization System (ARES) is two separate routines. Moreover, ARES and my room just didn't get on, and I soon

found myself ditching the processor's suggested parameters, adjusting every setting by knowledge, ear and dB meter, and kicking back for a night at the movies.

Utterly immersive

The Krell Foundation unleashed a cinematic aural tsunami with the first flick I fed it. Its sonic scale is huge, the feel is utterly immersive and the sound is completely free from strain. This is a processor that will please at every level, with every genre and disappear into the background whilst allowing the film's soundtrack, effects and dialogue to simply shine through. I hadn't got to the opening titles of *Cloud Atlas* on Blu-ray before knowing in my heart that Krell had not let me down.

Its balance is smooth as silk, with a spectacular clarity and insight throughout the midrange, and the image, unfettered by processing, allows your Blu-ray player to do its very best while the Foundation just gets on with raising the sonic bar for home cinema at this price point.

Two weeks later I cannot find a single sonic or operational foible to moan about. With action flicks it provides an intensity that keeps you right on the edge of your seat, while a family night with *Mamma Mia* was utterly infectious, toe-tappingly good fun.

An evening with a trio of *Fast and Furious* movies proved the Krell can get loud and proud without losing its fabulous grip on the overall picture, and switching to music allowed it to morph seamlessly into a high-end stereo pre-amp. I can promise a significant upgrade from your current CD player unless it is of truly stellar provenance.

So, while those with a love of the latest AV gadgetry, natty onscreen GUIs and more than seven channels are going to be left wanting, it's only until they hear what the Krell Foundation can do ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Pro-Logic IIx
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. And Neo:6
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No
MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2
AV INPUTS: 2 x composite; 6 x digital audio (3 x optical and 3 x coaxial)
HDMI: 10 x inputs; 2 x outputs
COMPONENT VIDEO: Yes. 3 x inputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: No. Only analogue-to-HDMI conversion
DIMENSIONS: 433(w) x 427(d) x 88(h)mm
WEIGHT: 8.1kg
ALSO FEATURING: Intelligent HDMI switching; Audio Return Channel (ARC) on both HDMI outputs; Krell ARES setup and EQ; 3D passthrough; wired Ethernet; 2 x 12V triggers; balanced XLR output; stereo balanced XLR input; mini USB for non on-line firmware updates; General Admission, Front Row, On Stage, Enhanced Stereo, Orchestra, Mezzanine, Full Range + Sub, Monophonic and Party post-processing modes

HCC VERDICT

Krell Foundation

→ £6,500 Approx
 → www.krell.com → Tel: 0208 971 3909
 (www.absolutesounds.com)

HIGHS: Class-leading cinematic sound; sublime musical performance; extensive range of digital connections; gorgeous looks and brand kudos

LOWS: Lack of a GUI makes setup awkward; ARES didn't like my room; no 4K passthrough, upscaling or height/width processing

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Air Powered Performance



Sound-tuned by the illustrious Air Studios, the SC-LX87 brings studio quality sound and the pinnacle of performance with effortless Class D amplification.



Enjoy app control with iControlAV2013, 4K Ultra HD pass-through and upscaling, high resolution audio via USB-DAC, USB and network connection. Multi-zone capabilities also extend entertainment throughout the home.

Pioneer

www.pioneer.co.uk



King of clarity

There's an almighty war being waged in the mid-range AVR market, but Yamaha is in with a fighting chance thanks to its detail-loving RX-V675. **Adrian Justins** reports



YAMAHA SEEMS TO have more receivers than the entire NFL, with the RX-V675 sitting smack bang in the middle of an 11-strong lineup. Priced at £500, and claimed to deliver 125W per channel, its feature set is aimed at the home cinema enthusiast with a small-to-medium sized room rather than the mega-bucks custom install crowd. It does a lot that you would expect of a mid-range AVR and Yamaha has squeezed in some tempting higher-end features, notably multizone compatibility, 4K upscaling and MHL HDMI support for playing back HD movies from a tablet or smartphone.

Absent are built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. Instead, Yamaha will sell you its YWA-10 Wi-Fi Adapter and YBA-11 Bluetooth Wireless Adapter, should you have the spare cash and want to fully streamline your network.

Apple fans are better served than owners of Windows and Android devices when it comes to wireless streaming, thanks to the provision of AirPlay, but DLNA networking at least means it's possible to access music, including 24-bit FLAC tunes, from a server. vTuner provides extensive internet radio access. Napster and Spotify are onboard, too.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Lower mid-range
7.2-channel AVR

POSITION:
Middle of an
11-strong line-up

PEERS:
Denon AVR-X2000;
Pioneer VSX-923;
Onkyo TX-NR626

Pure of heart

Proprietary Yamaha innovations include Dialogue Lift, Dialogue Level Adjustment and calibration using YPAO Reflected Sound Control (RSC). Critically,

the RX-V675 is a beneficiary of Yamaha's Total Purity Concept, which utilises discrete power amplifiers for each channel in order to minimise distortion. Dedicated power supplies for the analogue and digital circuitry help prevent digital noise from affecting analogue processes whilst bespoke heatsinks are designed to suppress vibration from transistors.

As a music machine, the Yamaha ticks along nicely. Aside from the fact bitrates aren't revealed and you can't search for a station name, the vTuner system is well implemented, handily revealing bonus folders of recent podcasts for some stations – for example, I stumbled across a fascinating Mick Jagger interview on Absolute Radio. AirPlay works well, with album artwork displayed alongside artist, album and track names.

As for multichannel material, the RX-V675 seems perfectly suited to a good set of small or medium speakers, such as my own Q Acoustics Q 7000s. Sound quality is vibrant, crisp and clear. The SACD recording of *War of the Worlds* has incredible clarity, with Richard Burton's commentary resonating with spine-tingling sonorousness.

Despite a slight lack of warmth, Blu-rays are delightful, too, with the RX-V675 bringing out unexpected subtleties in *The Rise of the Guardians*, such as the engine and whistle of the toy ice train and the splintering ice as Jack Frost plays on the frozen lake. There may be some material for which Yamaha's myriad DSP modes improve matters but sticking with the direct mode generally pays dividends – you'll soon be reaching for your favourite discs, eager to sample the AVR's intense, well-steered delivery ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Dolby Pro-Logic IIx; Dolby Digital EX

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. Plus DTS Neo:6; DTS 96/24

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):
7 x 125W

MULTIROOM: Yes. Second audio zone
AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial)

HDMI: 6 x inputs; 1 x output

COMPONENT VIDEO: 2 x inputs; 1 x output

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 171(h) x 364(d)mm

WEIGHT: 10kg

ALSO FEATURING: Binding-post speaker terminals plus Zone 2 spring clips; bi-amping; simultaneous Zone 1 and 2 operation; lip sync; Cinema DSP 3D; Virtual Presence Speaker; Compressed Music Enhancer; DSD; multiple DSPs; media playback including FLAC (192kHz/24-bit), PCM, WAV, WMA; Apple iOS and Android control apps; FM/AM tuner with RDS; AirPlay; vTuner internet radio; Napster; DLNA compatible; Ethernet; 12V trigger; DC inputs for Wi-Fi and Bluetooth adapters; USB input

HCC VERDICT

Yamaha RX-V675

→ £500 Approx → uk.yamaha.com
→ Tel: 0844 811 1116

HIGHS: Powerful, clean sound; efficient setup system; audio streaming quality; smartphone app control

LOWS: Primitive onscreen graphics; cramped remote control; Bluetooth and Wi-Fi are optional extras

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

ROCK STEADY...



Since its inception, home theatre has presented tasks to high-end audio designers that challenge them in ways not seen before in a two-channel, analogue milieu. Digital surround sound processing directly confronted traditionalist music lovers, too, who felt that it compromised the purity of true high-end performance.

The wizards at Krell responded with a "clean sheet" approach, by delivering home theatre control centres to satisfy all purist criteria. The Foundation 7.1-Channel AV Processor is the latest in that long line, offering everything needed to master today's myriad viewing formats – from Blu-ray to 3D pass-through to TVs with built-in streaming – while maintaining Krell's exacting standards for analogue audio reproduction.



absolute sounds ltd.

International Distributors & Consultants of Specialised Hi-End Audio & Video Systems
58 Durham Road, London, SW20 0TW T: +44 (0)20 89 71 39 09 F: +44 (0)20 88 79 79 62
W: www.absolutesounds.com E: info@absolutesounds.com



Connected contender

Onkyo's TX-NR626 is unique in the entry-level AV receiver market as it provides both integrated Bluetooth and Wi-Fi. **Adrian Justins** enjoys the flexibility



THE £500 RECEIVER arena is fiercely contested and Onkyo has spiced things up by chopping £100 off the launch price of the TX-NR626, giving it a serious fiscal advantage. In terms of specification the Onkyo claims a power output of 160W per channel (into 6 ohms) and an extensive complement of sockets including nine sets of speaker terminals, catering for various configurations. There are two HDMI outputs and although AirPlay is absent, the feather in its connectivity cap is the provision of Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, with the latter combining nicely with an iOS/Android app to stream hi-res lossless audio from smartphones and tablets.

This app also fulfils all remote control duties if you should tire of the handset, which is about two thirds the size of regular AVR remotes and has a complex layout with titchy non-backlit buttons.

Network services are more extensive than most, including some DLNA action, plus Spotify's subscription service, Last.FM, Aupeol!,

MP3 Tunes, Simfy and the excellent Tuneln internet radio client.

The TX-NR626 looks great, with a neat frontage with low-profile buttons and a flat, smooth fascia. One odd thing, though, is that its MHL-compatible HDMI socket is located on

the rear panel, which is a daft place to put it. Otherwise, setting up and using the TX-NR626 is a pleasant enough experience, thanks to the layout and appearance of the OSD. The graphical icons and text aren't as polished as some rivals but the folder structure is logical and intuitive. One nice touch is the InstaPrevue window, which shows thumbnails of up to four incoming HDMI signals.

Ready to rumble

The TX-NR626 is a well-oiled machine – aside from the Bluetooth integration, which requires you to press a button on the front of the amp. Pairing can be painfully slow. Still, it's great being able to stream music from a phone via the Onkyo app, with album artwork nicely displayed on the TV screen. Audio quality is excellent, with an AIFF version of Radiohead's *Fake Plastic Trees* sounding beautifully clear and resonant.

Movie performance is terrific, too, although it is a little more concerned with punch rather than poise. With the nighttime attack on Django and Dr Schultz's empty camp in *Django Unchained*, the amp deftly handles the shooting, explosions and screams, with shots whizzing round the rears more accurately than the hero's pistol work. Plenty of clarity to the squelchy leaves, knife-cutting and eerie-sounding crows helps generate a sense of foreboding. And when the giant picks up Eddie Marsan in *Jack and the Giant Slayer* you can practically smell the beast's rotten breath coming through the rears.

Overall, the TX-NR626 is an affordable, feature-packed AVR with an energetic sound ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. Plus Dolby Pro Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes.; DTS ES; DTS Neo:6; DTS 96/24

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 160W (6 ohms)

MULTIROOM: Yes. 2 zones

AV INPUTS: 4 x composite;; 3 x digital audio (1 x optical, 2 x coaxial)

HDMI: 6x inputs; 2 x outputs

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

COMPONENT VIDEO: yes 1-in, 1-out

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 328(d) x 174(h)mm

WEIGHT: 10.0kg

ALSO FEATURING: Apple OS and Android control apps; Ethernet; Wi-Fi; Bluetooth 2.1; DLNA 1.5 certified; Spotify; Last.fm; Tuneln, Simfy, Aupeol!, MP3 tunes; DSD; audio file playback via USB/LAN; 6 x stereo phono inputs; Audyssey MultEQ XT; Audyssey Dynamic EQ

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
7.2-channel
AV receiver

POSITION:
Near the bottom
of Onkyo's current
AVR lineup

PEERS:
Yamaha RX-V675;
Denon AVR-X2000;
Pioneer VSX-923

HCC VERDICT

Onkyo TX-NR626

→ £400 Approx → www.onkyo.co.uk
→ Tel: 01628 473350

HIGHS: Powerful, tight sound; impressive specifications including Wi-Fi and network audio clients; simple to use

LOWS: A little brash; faff to use Bluetooth; MHL HDMI pointlessly located on rear panel; cramped remote

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Fresh-faced firepower

Denon wants to reinvigorate the humble receiver with its AVR-X4000, but does this next-generation offering live up to the legendary legacy of the brand, wonders **Steve May**?



SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. Plus Dolby Digital Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. Plus DTS Neo:X
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT: 7 x 125W (8ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes. Three zones
HDMI: 7 x inputs; 3 x outputs
COMPONENT VIDEO: 2 x inputs; 1 x output
AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial)
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
DIMENSIONS: 434(w) x 378(d) x 187(h)mm
WEIGHT: 12.3kg
ALSO FEATURING: Audyssey's MultEQ XT32 audio calibration and LFC; Audyssey DSX processing; HDMI passthrough; Apple iOS and Android control apps; DLNA 1.5 media playback; Ethernet; USB; AirPlay; vTuner; Spotify; Flickr; D.D.S.C-HD; Denon Link HD; AL24 Processing Plus; HDMI InstaPrevue; nine-channel pre-out

DENON HAS HIGH hopes for its X-series of AV receivers, with the range boasting an unapologetically modernistic feature set and some welcome refinements, including a reworked user interface, clearer front panel display and hand-holding Setup Assistant to demystify installation. The model featured here tops the lineup, but at £1,200 and tipping the scales at 12.3kg, it's more cruiserweight than heavyweight.

The AVR-X4000 is a seven-channel design, but supports nine-channel processing should you want to lace up an additional stereo power amp. Cosmetically, its slick without being idiosyncratic. The fascia itself has a neat, brushed finish and lightweight symmetrical control knobs that frame a central trapdoor.

HDMI provision is generous, with six inputs (plus a seventh around the front), coupled to InstaPrevue thumbnail previews. There are three HDMI outs, two of which can serve the main viewing room, with an independent feed for a second zone.

The receiver can also distribute audio only to a third zone.

Room EQ comes via Audyssey's multiple-position MultEQ XT32 system and supplied mic. There're plenty of other useful features on board, too, including Apple AirPlay and Spotify. The latter's onscreen

presentation is somewhat simplistic but it works well enough.

Positive performance

The AVR-X4000's sonic characteristic is full-blooded but sweet – it's the musical equivalent of a Ferrero Rocher box. Digitalon's electro bop *Seraphim (Angel Mix)*, streamed as a FLAC Studio Master from Linn Records, is rich and gluttonous. And call me a heathen, but I preferred the receiver's all-channel stereo presentation to its direct two-channel delivery.

Indeed, the immersive nature of the AVR-X4000's soundfield is a consistent joy. With Sky Sports' 5.1 F1 HD race coverage, my viewing room sounded as if under siege from angry bees. Engines were panned front to back, left and right, in a glorious cacophony.

With pumped-up actioners like *The Expendables 2* and its DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix, the AVR-X4000 stomps around like a belligerent teenager, kicking cans and debris into every corner of the room with gusto. As Sly and his team unleash their ordnance, the Denon responds with quick-fire transients. It's impossible to suppress a grin at its antics, even though centre channel dialogue delivery occasionally sounds a tad polite. Clarity and definition remain admirable.

The amplifier is rated at 125W (into 8 ohms) with all channels driven. While not an out-and-out volume monster, it doesn't strain when cranked loud; the integrity of the soundstage isn't compromised, remaining classy and controlled across the range. Indeed, the AVR-X4000 delivers on its modern promise – forward-thinking and fine-sounding ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Mid-range seven-channel AV receiver

POSITION:
Leading the line of Denon's 2013 receivers, below the 2012-era AVR-4520

PEERS:
Pioneer SC-LX57; Yamaha RX-A1030

HCC VERDICT

Denon AVR-X4000

→ £1,200 Approx → www.denon.co.uk
 → Tel: (0)2890 279830

HIGHS: Engaging multichannel delivery; generous connectivity; excellent network streaming and content support

LOWS: Almost too refined; no Bluetooth; not as intuitive as Denon would have us believe; only seven channels of amplification

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Virtual sonic superstar

Think you haven't got room for a 9.2-channel system? Then you haven't reckoned on Sony's feature-packed STR-DA5800ES, says **Steve May**



THE STR-DA5800ES IS an AV receiver unlike any other. With it Sony has avoided the obvious – there's no AirPlay or Bluetooth streaming – but pushed the envelope when it comes to leading-edge signal processing and usability. It's remarkably forgiving of your living space but offers uncompromised audio quality. For many AV enthusiasts this will sound like very good news indeed.

The receiver is a 9.2-channel affair, rated at 120W per channel (into 8 ohms). In addition to the standard seven-channel array, there are optional front height channels. Alternatively, you can bi-amp the front stereo pair.

The STR-DA5800ES is more at home networked than most. Once online you can play your own content or take advantage of Sony's catch-up and IPTV services. Unusually for an AVR, there's video content as well as audio. LoveFilm sits alongside 'net radio.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Networked
9.2-channel AVR

POSITION:
The STR-DA5800ES sits at the top of Sony's home cinema AVR lineup

PEERS:
Pioneer SC-LX87;
Yamaha RX-A3020;
Denon AVR-4520

Impressive usability

The user front-end offered is terrific, with hi-res graphics reminiscent of a Smart TV. The supplied D.C.A.C. EX auto-calibration system is ruthlessly efficient, making setup a doddle.

What's particularly clever is that Sony applies considerable

processing grunt to compensate for all those physical restrictions that affect real-world listeners – after all, few have a perfect listening space at their disposal. A centre speaker Lift Up function virtually raises the vocal height of the centre speaker, often positioned too low because of room restraints – and it works well.

No room for front height speakers? Then try this AVR's Virtual Front High Speaker function instead, which psycho-acoustically adds cloudy atmospherics. This ambience is actually created out of the main stereo mix, and not any specific height information, but it's surprisingly effective. It certainly relocated more chimps into my rafters during Caesar's incarceration pen sequence from *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. Virtual Speaker Relocation is available for all nine channels, allowing you to create a soundstage that would otherwise be impossible to obtain.

In full flight, the STR-DA5800ES proves massively exciting. It handles big theatrics with the ease of Patrick Stewart. The opening of J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek* on Blu-ray is fast and visceral, with high-pitched pings and explosive LFE coming from every angle. There's a fourth-generation wideband power plant at work here, and it delivers stellar transients. The receiver never rasps at high volume, leaving detail and intelligibility untarnished.

As a high-octane multichannel movie machine this ES flagship is a blast – an inspired update on the STR-DA5700ES, with more power, better build quality and improved audio processing ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. And Neo: X
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes. 7.1 phono
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):
9 x 120W (8 ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2
AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 5 x S-video; 6 x digital audio (3 x optical and 3 x coaxial)
HDMI: 9 x inputs; 3 x outputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
COMPONENT VIDEO: Yes. 2-in, 0-out
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) 187.5(h) x 420(d)mm
WEIGHT: 17.8kg
ALSO FEATURING: Ethernet; 2 x USB inputs (1 x USB Type B); media playback via DLNA/USB; Sony Entertainment network and content portal; D.C.A.C. EX auto calibration; HDMI preview; ES Remote app; Sound Optimizer; HD Digital Cinema Sound; Virtual height; speaker relocation; Centre Speaker Lift Up mode; automatic phase matching; Portable Audio Enhancer; 3 x 12V triggers

HCC VERDICT

Sony STR-DA5800ES

→ £2,200 Approx → www.sony.co.uk
→ Tel: 0844 8466 555

HIGHS: Powerful, dynamic multichannel delivery; advanced audio processing modes; integrated network switch; great user interface; streaming video content support

LOWS: No Airplay; no Spotify; no THX post-processing; no 11-channel pre-out

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

MAKE ROOM FOR THE TREE



"The sense of drama and excitement is enhanced by the ASB-2's ability to communicate the film's score. This level of musicality is difficult to pull off in a soundbar."

2.1 SPEAKER SYSTEM • 3D SURROUND EFFECT • 3 HDMI INPUTS • AIRPLAY® • AIRPLAY DIRECT • DLNA®

SPACE SAVING SOUND BAR NONE

ASB-2: sound, surround and streaming, all-in-one. This Christmas make space for the tree not the speakers. 40 years of Award Winning speaker technology in the world's most complete soundbar



Yamaha's deadly duo

Big on power and brimming with complex features, Yamaha's top-of-the-line processor/amp duo isn't a system for scaredy cats. **Steve May** braces himself for an AV thrill ride



The CX-A5000 is supplied with a button-strewn remote

WE'VE WAITED A heck of a long time for Yamaha to launch a new home cinema hero to replace the venerable DSP-Z11. But rather than update that integrated design, the brand has opted to birth a pre/power combination as part of its premium Aventure line – and it's a formidable creation.

Cosmetically, the duo are spectacular. The CX-A5000, with two-tone cosmetics and a large status window, is a real head-turner, while the power amp's central cyclopean backlit power button is positively iconic. The latter tips the scales at 25.4kg and stands tall at 210mm.

Connectivity is outstanding. Behind the processor's fascia drawbridge you'll find HDMI and phono AV inputs, plus USB and calibration mic ports. The HDMI is MHL-enabled. This allows users to hookup an Android phone (any of the recent Samsungs or HTC's will do), or an oddball Nokia, to deliver AV up to 7.1 audio and 1080p. The back panel is a more daunting mix of skull-pluggery. Seven HDMI inputs, four component, an Ethernet port, six digital audio inputs, two 12V triggers, remote in/out jacks, an RS232 and a selection of phono AVs make up the mix. Underscoring the lot are balanced XLR outputs for all channels. The muscular,

matching MX-A5000 amplifier (11-channel) offers balanced XLR inputs and unbalanced phonos should you want to partner the power amp with an older/different processor.

Beneath the lid of the MX-A5000 lurks a huge toroidal transformer and two high-capacity (27,000uF) block capacitors. Yamaha rates the amp's output at 150W-per-channel into 8 ohms, and when powered up it happily saps some 650W off the national grid.

The CX-A5000 processor is very complex. You can go deep in terms of calibration and signal management – although it's fair to add that's both a blessing and a curse. Even the initial hookup is unconventional. Rather than proffer specific labelled speakers (left, centre, surround right, etc), the amp offers channel numbers. The argument is that this approach offers superior flexibility during installation.

There may be no THX post-processing here but there's a big upgrade to the brand's signature Cinema DSP, with two chipsets dedicated to acoustical fine-tuning. Apparitional speaker imaging has long been a talent of Yamaha, and it's widely touted here. The CX-A5000 will fill in the rears with virtual presence speakers if you don't have physical boxes, although if you're going to spend £5,000

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 11-channel processor/power amp combi

POSITION: At the very top of Yamaha's Aventure AV range

PEERS: Arcam FMJ AVR750; Marantz AV8801/MM8801



on this kind of kit without a full array of speakers you need a virtual head exam.

There are 33 DSP modes in total, all based on acoustically-measured venues; for copyright and licensing reasons the company doesn't divulge their locations. More processing grunt has also been thrown at its auto calibration system, with YPAO promising greater number-crunching refinement. You can opt for a single listening position measurement, or multiple and angled measurements. These prove vital.

Functionality is largely in line with the rest of the Aventure fleet. AirPlay is built-in as standard, but there's no integrated Wi-Fi or Bluetooth support. Instead, the brand offers optional aptX Bluetooth and wireless adaptors. The former works off the rear USB slot and offers a coax output that allows the DAC in the processor to handle the conversion. Streaming support from both USB and NAS reaches up to 192kHz, with FLAC and WAV. But there's no support for DSD or Apple lossless.

The processor's UI is the same Yamaha front-end we've had for a while, and frankly it doesn't really cut the mustard. For a box dedicated to high-resolution audio and video, the interface is embarrassingly low-fi, with almost incomprehensible artwork icons.

Unleashing the magic

The CX-A5000/MX-A5000 is both magnificent and challenging. Depending on content, I found myself forever going back, tweaking and manipulating, not least because the system encourages it. Although the power amp runs to 11 channels, I initially used it in a standard configuration 7.2, although I eventually added a third sub, which naturally complicated the whole process. Subwoofer management includes an adjustable filter

roll-off that can be used to shave bass from content, typically dialogue, that shouldn't be leaking out of your woofer.

Yamaha's flagship two-piece is frankly powerful enough to bring a small hall to the brink of sonic meltdown, and is ideally used in a dedicated theatre with all the construction finesse which that implies. Tonally, the system is peanut brittle rather than chocolate Gü. Even after days of Rammstein's *Völkerball*, it refused to really mellow. Unlike some of Yamaha's more mainstream offerings, this pre/power is not a UK-tuned product. Instead it's described as a 'collaboration' between different Yamaha territories and Japan. Yamaha has reputedly recalled its senior engineers from boardroom duties and given them responsibility for prestige hardware launches like this.

The good news is that the sheer wealth of calibration on offer ultimately allows the system to be carved into something very special indeed. After some experimentation, I found that to get the best from the YPAO I had to include angle measurements, which seem to make a massive difference to the calibration process. But even after that some manual adjustment was required. In my listening room, with Definitive Technology Reference in-walls, I took the crossover of the centre channel down to 60Hz, the left/rights to 80Hz, and left the four surrounds set Large. After a little more massaging, this 7.3 system really began to gel.

The power and directionality on tap is astonishing. When Katniss Everdeen flees a forest of fireballs in *The Hunger Games*, the resulting destruction is positively holographic. From the ambience of the canopy to splintering trees, the soundstage is immense.

Similarly, looping the opening car race to *The Fast and Furious 6* proves to be the next best thing to a free pass to the Paddock Club on Silverstone race day. The articulation of this system is extraordinary; the sound mix that makes up the roaring car notes reveals itself in tantalising layers. Then the 2 Chainz And Wiz Khalifa theme song kicks in and the grin across my face widens.

Of course, there's musicality to the combo too; the system is as sprightly and rhythmic as it is insanely dynamic. But I wouldn't buy it to play music, this is an AV thoroughbred and proud of it. It does what all great home theatre components do: makes you want to watch your favourite movies time and again.

Worth waiting for

Yamaha's CX-A5000/MX-A5000 Aventure combo may not be for the faint-hearted, but this long-awaited flagship will fast-track you to a thrilling AV ride. In terms of sheer might and depth, no other home theatre product I've used has come close – the sheer rush of running this system at -15dB more than compensates for its minor foibles. A potent reminder of just what Yamaha is capable of ■

ON THE MENU



→ We found that to truly optimise the performance of the Yamaha combo we needed to take advantage of the manual speaker setup...

SPECIFICATIONS

CX-A5000

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes. 7.1

MULTIROOM: Yes. Three additional zones
AV INPUTS: 4 x composite; 4 x S-Video; 7 x digital audio (4 x optical and 3 x coaxial)

HDMI: 8 x inputs; 2 x outputs, v1.4

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 2160p

COMPONENT VIDEO: 4 x inputs; 1 x output

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 192(h) x 448(d)mm

WEIGHT: 13.6kg

ALSO FEATURING: XLR output; Cinema DSP; Virtual Rear Presence Speakers; dialogue lift; 12 Scene presets; MHL support; HDMI passthrough; Apple OS and Android control apps; multi-point YPAO RoomEQ; audio file playback via DLNA; high-resolution music enhancer; Ethernet; USB; AirPlay; Spotify Connect; Bluetooth and Wi-Fi via optional dongles

MX-A5000

POWER OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 11 x 150W

CONNECTIONS: Balanced XLR inputs for all channels; phono inputs; eleven speaker channel outputs; 12V trigger

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 210(w) x 463.5(d)mm

WEIGHT: 25.4kg

ALSO FEATURING: ART (Anti-Resonance Technology) wedge; H-frame with double-bottom construction; three-stage Darlington circuit; Auto-Power standby

HCC VERDICT

Yamaha CX-A5000/MX-A5000

→ £2,500/£2,500 → www.uk.yamaha.com

→ Tel: 0844 811 1116

HIGHS: Herculean muscle; dazzling dynamics; deep calibration modes; comprehensive connectivity; outstanding build quality

LOWS: Head-scratchingly complex to optimise; no THX post-processing; fuzzy UI; only two HDMI outputs; can sound a touch hard

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Marantz's triple-decker AV sandwich

Separating AV processing and amplification can reap performance benefits, discovers **Richard Stevenson** – and Marantz will even sell you a matching disc-spinner...

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Universal BD player, 11-channel processor and seven-channel power amp

POSITION:

Top of the brand's AV range

PEERS:

Denon AVR-4520/ DBT-3313UD; Onkyo PR-SC5509/ PA-MC5501/ BP-SP809

WHILE OTHER BRANDS, such as Pioneer and even Marantz's sibling Denon, have opted for an integrated battleship AV receiver to top their range, Marantz is going for a fleet approach; the AV8801 AV processor frigate and the MM807 amp destroyer. It's all about performance. The system, particularly when partnered with the UD7007 Blu-ray player, as it is here, has been designed to deliver the sonic goods with more accuracy and firepower than a standard player/AVR combo can achieve.

This plan of dividing to conquer comes straight from Marantz's illustrious hi-fi heritage. In the rarefied atmosphere of high-fidelity, where geeks pursue the n'th degree of audio precision by means both physical and meta-physical, the benefits of splitting the pre-amplifier and power amplifiers into separate units are well established. Apply that to home cinema and you can see that inside any AV processor are micro-current signals, high-speed digital DSP

and sensitive video circuits. If you place power stages big enough to wake Frankenstein's monster in the same box, chances are there will be some serious interference.

A better solution is to place the delicate circuits and high-voltage rails in their own separate metal enclosures, to stop any RF-borne interference. Marantz has taken the concept to its ultimate degree by over-engineering the boxes with copper chassis and braced panels, and then coupling them together with interference-rejecting balanced audio connections. The result is an enormous pair of boxes, sucking electricity from two wall sockets and taking up an acre of shelf space.

Thankfully, that is about as hi-fi tweaky as the Marantz system gets. Rather than strip back on niceties the AV8801 is right up there with top-spec AVRs in terms of features and functionality. It's a true 11.2-channel processor, capable of delivering height and width channels in addition to seven normal channels



Use the supplied remotes or the Android/iOS control apps

and two subwoofers. There is full-fat Audyssey MultEQ XT32 room correction, upscaling to 4K for all video sources, AirPlay and a built-in four-port Ethernet network switch. There's also a two-plus-one HDMI output, 192kHz/24-bit and FLAC audio compatibility, integrated Spotify, DLNA, MHL and iPod connectivity.

Features like InstaPrevue and the look of the GUI indicate rather close collusion between Denon and Marantz – the AV8801 offers a similar user experience to that of the Denon AVR-4520. That's certainly no bad thing, as the AVR-4520 is stunningly well-featured and the AV8801 delivers pretty much the same flexibility.

The MM8807 power amp shares exactly the same copper-bottomed chassis as the processor and weighs about as much as a small Death Star. Inside is pure Marantz

'The overall sound is rich, hefty and big, with amazing solidity in the low-frequency reproduction'

engineering, with seven 'current feedback' discrete amplifiers offering a solid 150W apiece. The front panel offers a power button, which will have you hollering 'Mwahaaaaa' like an *Austin Powers* villain as you unleash over a kilowatt, and a button to disable the infuriating automatic power-off system.

It is safe to say that I like the Marantz system a lot, but like all such dream systems there are a couple of monsters lurking in the shadows. Despite the beefy internal construction, I remain unimpressed with the exterior. The plastic side cheeks to the fascia feel a bit down-market and the top cover of the MM8077, in particular, has all the structural integrity of a biscuit tin. The remotes are a bit lacklustre too; cramped, with an LCD display too small to be of any use for the AV8801 and, with the Marantz logo at the bottom, all too easy to pick up the wrong way around.

Setup is aided by a very slick and easy to use wizard. It leads you through connections, network setup, video settings and auto EQ in a step-by-step manner than can be quickly skipped through if you know your HDMI's from your banana plugs. The setup concludes by running Audyssey's MultEQ XT32; I recommend going the whole hog and measuring the full eight different points around the seating position to get the best balance.

Scale and dynamism

The Marantz system delivers a scale and dynamic punch that single-box AV receivers can only dream of. The opening sequence to *Star Trek* (the 2009 movie, not the TV series

with the wobbly sets) has the battle with the Romulan mining vessel crashing through my room with lasers and photon torpedoes bouncing off every wall. The explosions are absolutely massive and, with floorstanding speakers set to large and both subs set to stun, I sensed a very real danger of structural damage. By the time Kirk (Snr) is charging the *USS Kelvin* on collision course, I was scrabbling around the sofa hoping to find a seat belt.

The overall sound is rich, hefty and big – really big – with amazing solidity in the low-frequency reproduction. Dialogue is produced very much as part of the mix, not actually leaping out of the speaker but well articulated and superbly integrated with the overall soundstage, and the top-end is clean and smooth with good detailing of high-frequency effects. I never felt in danger of the sound getting shouty or acerbic, and this smooth balance just begs you to go large with the volume dial. Even with the volume at hooligan levels, the Marantz hangs the sound together brilliantly, generating 110dB peaks in my room without any sign of strain or fatigue. Only the 12in bass unit in one of my large main speakers hitting its end stops indicated it was time to back down a bit.

Turn off the Audyssey EQ and the eminently rich and smooth balance becomes a little bit too mellifluous for its own good. Dialogue shrinks back into the centre speaker and the overall soundstage turns into something akin to a fresh pancake; warm and sweet yet rather flat. So leave it on – Audyssey EQ absolutely nails the perfect balance of power and passion for the Marantz system, allowing sparkle and clarity to shine through its power-house sound.

In performance terms, the UD7007 is right up there with the best Blu-ray players of the current crop, with a razor-sharp hi-def image, authentic colours and silk-smooth scrolling. 3D playback proved faultless and the picture adjustment options give you plenty of flexibility to tune the image to your display and personal taste. For CDs and Super Audio CD playback the UD7007's balanced XLR outputs deliver the sort of warm and inviting audiophile performance one might reasonably expect from a dedicated high-end CD player. Sure, it lacks the latest Smart features of the big-brand machines but you don't spend £1,000 on a BD deck to faff about on Twitter, and is easily recommended as a standalone purchase.

But why go separate on your separates? This Marantz trio is dying to be used as a homogeneous whole. A system for grown-ups, it has a mature and sophisticated presentation that won't fatigue even after extended listening. Moreover, it's better featured than most AVR-based setups, thanks to its 11-channel output. Personally I would be rather less than grown up and buy a second MM8807, yet as it stands in seven-channel guise this flagship array is a sure-fire winner ■

SPECIFICATIONS

AV 8801 PROCESSOR

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And DPL IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. And Neo:X (11.1)

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes. 7.1 phono inputs
MULTIROOM: Yes. Three zones

AV INPUTS: Yes. 4 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial)

HDMI: 7 x inputs; 3 x outputs

COMPONENT: 3 x inputs; 2 x outputs

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K for all sources

DIMENSIONS: 440(w) x 395(d) x 187(h)mm

WEIGHT: 13.9kg

FEATURES: Balanced XLR outputs/inputs; AirPlay; DLNA; Audyssey MultEQ XT32; four-port Ethernet hub; AM/FM; 'net radio; Spotify, Napster, YouTube integration; 12V triggers; IR control

UD7007 BLU-RAY PLAYER

3D: Yes. **UPSCALING:** Yes. To 1080p

MULTIREGION: No. Region B BD/R2 DVD

HDMI: 2 x outputs **COMPONENT:** No

MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE: No

DIGITAL AUDIO: Yes. 1 x coaxial output

ETHERNET: Yes **BUILT IN WI-FI:** No

SACD/DVD-A: Yes/Yes

DIMENSIONS: 440(w) x 108(h) x 308(d)mm

WEIGHT: 6.5kg

FEATURES: DLNA; 12V trigger and control phono connections; balanced XLR stereo output; USB input; Pure Direct mode; Netflix; YouTube

MM8807 POWER AMP

POWER OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 150W

CONNECTIONS: 7 x balanced XLR inputs; 7 x

analogue phono inputs; 12V trigger; IR flasher;

system remote in/out

DIMENSIONS: 440(w) x 384(d) x 185(h)mm

WEIGHT: 18kg

HCC VERDICT

Marantz AV8801/MM8807/UD7007

→ £2,500/£1,700/£1,000 Approx

→ www.marantz.co.uk

→ Tel: +44 2890 279 830

HIGHS: Massively potent, refined sound; packed with features; great BD, CD, SACD playback

LOWS: Not cheap; minor cosmetic niggles;

demands serious speaker package

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Diamonds are forever

Want a high-performance 5.1 array for less than £1,000? **Danny Phillips** reckons you should check out the latest iteration of Wharfedale's long-running Diamond speaker line



A BEST-SELLER IN its day, the original Diamond design delivered sparkling sound quality from compact cabinets (thanks in part to their use of stiff yet light polypropylene cones) and each generation since has introduced new technology or material to the market. Despite this evolution, its value-for-money ethos has remained constant – the Diamond 100-HCP (or Home Cinema Pack), is an impressively-specced 5.1 system that comes in at just under a grand.

It comprises two pairs of the company's new Diamond 121 standmounts for the fronts and rears, the 101C centre and the SPC-10 PowerCube subwoofer. The design is a little underwhelming. The black wood finish (also available in cherry, rosewood and walnut) and unique 'Diamond pattern' rings surrounding the cloth circles look pleasant enough, but the plasticky finish on the front panel and plinth betray their budget price tag.

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 5.1-channel speaker package

POSITION: Successor to the Diamond 10; floorstanders are also available

PEERS: Monitor Audio Mass 5.1; KEF E305

A sound to savour

If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the Diamond 100-HCP is absolutely delicious.

What makes it so tasty is the speakers' naturally rich and powerful bass output,

courtesy of Slot-Loaded Distributed Port technology. Low frequencies are tight and controlled, thumping right into your chest with no flab or colouration from the cabinets. You could quite happily listen to these *sans* sub and still enjoy a satisfying level of depth – great news for two-channel music listening as well as movies.

With the Stone Giants scene in *The Hobbit...* on Blu-ray, the sense of scale achieved by these unassuming speakers is remarkable. The giants slam boulders into each other with a massive, rumbling boom, and the cracking stones are delivered with no trace of harshness.

The SPC-10 subwoofer reinforces the speakers' bass notes brilliantly, fusing seamlessly without overpowering them. It's agile, too, handling the score's fast-paced kettle drums without overhang.

Nor is this array all about power – it demonstrates a great deal of finesse, too. In Peter Jackson's flick, the soundstage twinkles with light, airy high-frequency information, from the rustle of feet on woodland floors to the background murmur of Middle Earth wildlife. Meanwhile, the score's sweeping strings have a wonderfully rich quality.

The Diamond 100-HCP's intricate, textured sound stays smooth and unhurried even when you crank up the volume. Crucial dialogue is articulated in a clear, commanding manner, and the thrilling action all takes place within an expansive, tonally cohesive soundstage. A brilliant budget option ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DIAMOND 121

DRIVE UNITS: 5in woven Kevlar bass driver; 1in soft-dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Ported via Slot-Loaded Distributed Port
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 50Hz-20kHz
SENSITIVITY: 86dB
POWER HANDLING: 25-100W
DIMENSIONS: 174(w) x 315(h) x 255(d)mm
WEIGHT: 5.3kg

DIAMOND 101C CENTRE

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 5in woven Kevlar bass drivers; 1in soft-dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Ported via Slot-Loaded Distributed Port
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 60Hz-20kHz
SENSITIVITY: 89dB
POWER HANDLING: 25-150W
DIMENSIONS: 470(w) x 174(h) x 264(d)mm
WEIGHT: 8.2kg

SPC-10 POWERCUBE

DRIVE UNITS: 10in long-throw cone driver
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 35Hz-120Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 215W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 352(w) x 382(h) x 305(d)mm
WEIGHT: 11.4kg
CONNECTIONS: Stereo line in; mono (LFE) line in; stereo speaker level input

HCC VERDICT

Wharfedale Diamond 100-HCP

→ £950 Approx → www.wharfedale.co.uk

→ Tel: 01480 452561

HIGHS: Highly detailed sound; tight, potent bass reproduction; excellent value for money
LOWS: Plasticky finish and rather pedestrian looks; larger cabinets than rival sub/sat systems

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Eggzact sonic science

Adam Rayner meets the latest baby 'egg' speaker from KEF – and finds it offers a performance and design that's rather delicious



LIKE THE HUMBLE Golf GTi – another product that has been raved about down the years and has had a slew of extra engineering applied – the KEF egg speaker has got bigger and heavier. These E305 and E305c enclosures are not quite as dinky as the original eggs, being now a weighty 1.5-litre ovoid cabinet. They're mounted on a smart leg and base assembly, tightened up solidly via an Allen key. Additional floorstands, should you not want to mount these on a shelf, are available for £150 a pair.

The system comes in a matt white or black finish, all assembled in a single carton. Buyers get four E305 eggs in the top layer, with the E305c centre enclosure and the E-2 subwoofer nestled underneath. In my house, I would probably install the black version. There's nothing wrong with the white finish, but that lovely camel hump subwoofer is just bound to get a rubbery shoe-mark.

The woofer has only one control surface and that is the underside. Alongside the 8in cone, which is a long-travel design, you find

a single phono input socket, a main on/off switch and another smaller one you can use to set for manual or auto-sensing on/off. There is a simple 0-180 degrees phase flip switch and, lastly, an EQ bass boost switch with three positions. Plus or minus 2dB and one called '0dB' in the middle.

Easy rider

The enclosures are utterly easy to set up. Plug your speaker wires into their squeeze posts and a phono in the subwoofer and you're ready – no volume, no crossover to set. And if you want to try a few different angles and speaker positions (and the manual is good here) you'll appreciate their portability.

In use, the high-quality tweeters and the classic KEF detail and placement was there immediately. Coherency and high-frequency handling is superb. The -6dB figures for the upper cutoff of the tweeters is 45kHz, with 33kHz at the -3dB figure that the rigorous prefer. This equates to tinkly, engaging highs in the audible band – strings are given edges, cymbals have presence.

At the beginning of Pixar's *Brave* we follow the fiery princess as she goes for a wild ride through the forest, practising her archery skills. There's a brilliant scenario of whizzing arrows, big hoof beats of the heavy horse and rousing Scots song with layers of vocals. It is intensely complex and could get congested, yet the E305 system was equal to the challenge. There was, of course, a limit to the sheer scale and weight of that heavy horse, but to achieve that you will need to pay more, and the placement and image creation of Pixar's soundscape was ridiculously impressive for speakers this small. The seamless voice-matching that five identical boxes can do is the best definition of synergy I know, and it's in abundance here.

The E series is therefore an easy-to-recommend product. It's pretty, and wall-mountable if you wish, so will suit the fashion-conscious. And the sub-£1,000 ticket, while hardly 'budget', will ensure a broad appeal ■

SPECIFICATIONS

KEF E SERIES E301/E301C

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4.25in aluminium coned midbass driver with Z-Flex suspension; 1 x 0.75in vented aluminium dome tweeter with proprietary 'tangerine' waveguide

ENCLOSURE: Ported

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 90Hz-33kHz (+/-3dB)

SENSITIVITY: 86dB

POWER HANDLING: 100W

DIMENSIONS (E301): 136(w) x 260(h) x 159(d)mm

DIMENSIONS (E301C): 220(w) x 157(h) x 155(d)mm

WEIGHT: 2.4kg

KEF E-2 SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNIT: 1 x 8in driver with long-throw cone suspension

ENCLOSURE: Sealed, downward-firing

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 33Hz-280Hz

ON BOARD POWER: 250W RMS, Class D

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 320(h) x 270(d)mm

WEIGHT: 7.25kg

CONNECTIONS: Single LFE input

HCC VERDICT

KEF E Series E305 system

→ £900 Approx → www.kef.com

→ Tel: 01622 672 261

HIGHS: Lovely accurate soundstage with delicious detail and placement; excellent dynamics; great design

LOWS: A line-thru on the subwoofer and an option to buy extra ones would make it even better

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Mid-range 5.1
speaker system

POSITION:
The most high-end
of KEF's sub/sat
packages

PEERS:
Bowers & Wilkins
MT-50;
Quad L-ITE 2;
Dali FAZON Sat 5.1-1

Three is the magic number

UK speaker brand Acoustic Energy is on a charm offensive with its newly-designed 3-Series. **Ed Selley** sits back and prepares to be seduced



ACOUSTIC ENERGY IS best known for helping start the high-end standmount market with the original AE1, but it's been an equally potent force in multichannel systems over the years. The Neo Compact package I reviewed previously was an inspired pairing of three pairs of the Compact bookshelf speaker and a Neo sub. Certainly, it was a bit of a bargain.

What you see here is not an expedient collection of existing components but an all-new range of speakers. The 3-Series has been developed in-house and intends to combine the engineering virtues of the classic Acoustic Energy models with some 21st-century wizardry and aesthetics. This system comprises two pairs of the £425-per-pair 301 standmount, the £350 307 centre speaker and the £800 308 subwoofer.

Ready, set, go!

This array reproduces the cheery violence of *Dredd 3D* with a deftness and assurance that

is deeply impressive and extremely entertaining. Combining different driver materials in the same speaker can sometimes result in a little tonal imbalance, but the 300s are seamless from top to bottom, handing over from speaker to speaker beautifully. The

performance across the front trio, in particular, is a single superbly convincing soundstage.

Detail retrieval is also extremely good. With the rich soundtrack of *Super 8*, the package captures the nuances of the increasingly abnormal experience of the town of Lillian. The spread of sound from each speaker is a neat balance between being too broad and diffuse and equally not beaming a narrow signal at a single sweet spot. In a normal UK lounge, the results are likely to be entirely convincing.

The hi-fi heritage of AE is apparent when it comes to music and stereo, too. The 301 is a bit of a star in two-channel terms, and if you are looking for a speaker to handle an equal balance of tunes and movies this is a strong contender. It's rated frequency response, down to 48Hz, is sufficient for listening without the woofer if you fancy.

This isn't a slur on the 308 subwoofer, of course. Throughout my time with it, the sub didn't really put a foot wrong and managed to keep up with its agile passive brethren. Its control is impressive but on serious bass occasions – trains crashing, aliens wreaking havoc and other day-to-day stuff – it can occasionally be a little polite.

This minor limitation of the subwoofer is shared by the rest of speakers as well; how serious an issue it is will depend on your listening preferences. The sound is tight and smooth but every now and then I wanted a little more sheer vitality. That said, this is a seriously impressive offering. Fantastic looks, well put together and enjoyable to listen to ■

SPECIFICATIONS

301 STANDMOUNT

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in soft dome tweeter; 1 x 4.5in hard anodised aluminium cone

ENCLOSURE: Front slot-ported

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 48Hz-32kHz

SENSITIVITY: 87dB

POWER HANDLING: 150W

DIMENSIONS: 185(w) x 300(h) x 250(d)mm

WEIGHT: 5.5kg

307 CENTRE

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in soft dome tweeter; 2 x 4.5in hard anodised aluminium cones

ENCLOSURE: Front slot-ported

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 45Hz-32kHz

SENSITIVITY: 88dB

POWER HANDLING: 175W

DIMENSIONS: 450(w) x 185(h) x 260(d)mm

WEIGHT: 9kg

308 SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 12in pulp cone

ENCLOSURE: Sealed

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: Down to 28Hz

ON BOARD POWER: 500W

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 360(w) x 360(h) x 360(d)mm

WEIGHT: 20kg

CONNECTIONS: 1 x phono LFE input; 2 x phono line-level inputs; 2 x phono line-level outputs (loopthrough)

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Standmount 5.1 speaker array

POSITION: The first of three new ranges – the 3-Series is the middle offering

PEERS: KEF Q Series; Monitor Audio Silver

HCC VERDICT

Acoustic Energy 3-Series 5.1

→ £2,000 Approx → www.acoustic-energy.co.uk

→ Tel: 01285 654432

HIGHS: Excellent sound with movies and music; superb aesthetics; very impressive build

LOWS: Can lack the last degree of excitement; doesn't support bi-wiring/bi-amping; subwoofer is quite bulky

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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An Epic love story

Hunting for a multichannel package that's equally awe-inspiring with movies and music? Look no further than DALI's floorstanding Epicon array, says a smitten **Mark Craven**

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
High-end floorstanding 5.1 speaker array

POSITION:
Top of DALI's home cinema lineup

PEERS:
Bowers & Wilkins Diamond 800 series; KEF Reference

DANISH AUDIO MARQUE DALI (an acronym for Danish Audiophile Loudspeaker Industries, in case you're wondering) is renowned in hi-fi circles for its no-compromise high-end cabinets. Its flagship model, aptly named the Megaline, stands over 2.3m high and presents a front panel armed with no fewer than 30 drivers. It's the kind of speaker to send stereo fans into a state of ecstasy.

For home cinema setups, DALI buyers have to look below the Megaline to the brand's Epicon range, auditioned here. Yet this really isn't much of a step down – the culmination of thirty years of meticulous R&D, the Epicon lineup is where DALI has focused plenty of effort and, thankfully for multichannel addicts often ignored by premium speaker brands, it's seen fit to offer standmount models and a dedicated centre channel enclosure. A high-end 5.1 array is therefore possible – albeit at a cast of £17,000.

Meet the team

The system comprises a pair of Epicon 6 floorstanders for the front left and right channels, the Epicon Vokal centre speaker, Epicon 2s for the surround channels and a SUB P-10 DSS subwoofer on LFE duty.

The latter, as you may have guessed from the name, isn't an official part of the Epicon range – there is, in fact, no Epicon-branded woofer. This means that, stylistically, it's not quite an aesthetic match, unless you get it in its gloss black finish and specify the Epicons in the same flavour. Our eclectic lineup features the Epicon 6s in the more sumptuous Ruby Macassar guise, while the Epicon 2s are dressed in Walnut.

All the cabinets are highly attractive and built to exacting standards. The Epicon 6s are perhaps not as big as you might expect considering their £7,800-per-pair ticket, but that will make them easier to house. The

lacquer finish begs to be touched and the curved edges and sloping cabinet are easy on the eye (of course, the shape isn't all about styling, as it helps eliminate standing waves). Each cabinet is constructed from six layers of MDF and given 10 coats of lacquer. The quartet of binding posts on each (enabling bi-amping should you wish) feel supremely solid.

Remove the magnetic grilles and you can feast your eyes on DALI's drivers. The Epicon 6 incorporates two 6.5in mid-bass cones, made from a proprietary wood fibre material, and

'There's real scale here – with the rear channels in action, the effect is a wonderfully detailed wall of sound'

a pair of high-frequency drivers, one a soft dome and the other a ribbon design. DALI denotes this as a 'two-and-a-half-and-a-half-way' design.

Behind the scenes, there's some clever technology going on. DALI's self-developed non-conductive Soft Magnetic Compound (SMC) is employed in the driver magnet system to reduce distortion across the frequency range of the mid-bass cones – and each of these is ported via its own internal chamber, allowing each to be individually tuned. DALI supplied me with its white paper, but to convey the engineering involved in these speakers would require a whole other magazine. Needless to say, the engineers didn't spend a quarter of a century simply looking at different lacquer finishes.

The Epicon 2s, which would typically be mounted on optional stands, feature one 6.5in wood fibre driver and a soft dome tweeter, and sport a similar cabinet shape. The Vokal speaker, on the other hand, offers the same driver complement as the Epicon 6s, housed in one of the largest enclosures I've yet seen for a centre channel speaker. You'll need to think about where you're going to place it.

The aforementioned SUB P-10 DSS woofer features a trio of 10in drivers – one downward-firing and powered by a 500W on-board power plant; two side-firing and un-driven. It's nice to look at and not outrageously large. A small remote is on hand to adjust levels from the comfort of your listening position.

Beautiful mixture

There's no point beating about the bush – this system sounds awesome, up there with the best packages I've heard. It delivers a beautiful mixture of clarity, detail, energy and scale.

The Epicon 6s are the stars of the show. Floorstanding speakers designed very much with the hi-fi market in mind, the qualities they

possess work equally well with film soundtracks. I did, however, begin with some straight, two-channel material, enjoying the way the second bass driver, which is active below 600Hz, plumbs the depths, quickly and tightly, to track basslines, while higher frequency sounds have real presence.

Savour some 'known-good' multichannel tracks – namely Pink Floyd's *Time* and, er, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (sometimes, you just have to follow the crowd) and the Epicons continue to dazzle. The transparency and sheer clarity of system really came to the fore, with the discordant clocks that open the Pink Floyd song ringing so sweetly from all around the soundstage, with such unnerving placement, that I felt like a cat burglar in a Howard Miller factory.

When the instrumentation finally kicks in, the speakers' effortless performance across the entire frequency range is apparent. Everything from the lightly-driven guitars and thumping drums to the iconic basslines and David Gilmour's vocals sounds cleanly separated and extremely articulate. Tonal differences are immediately apparent.

There's real scale, too. With the rear channels in action, the effect is a wonderfully three-dimensional wall of sound, only built from individual elements rather than an unseemly mush. The subwoofer, meanwhile, adds a musical, rich low-frequency presence to the whole shebang, without drawing overt attention to itself – until the climatic cannon fire of Tchaikovsky's masterpiece, that is, where it underpins the artillery with force.

For movies, I opted first for *Casino Royale* and the famous free-running sequence, and the Vokal centre channel quickly earned its crust. This is no mealy-mouthed squawk box; character's voices come through with potent weight when required, but delicacy, too. Bond's mic'd voice whispers urgently in the ear of his inexperienced fellow agent, warning him to keep his cover in the presence of bomb-fanatic Mollaka, and it sounds frighteningly authentic. Then, when Mollaka realises he's been rumbled, the soundtrack introduces a number of effects which the DALI system revels in – Mollaka's panicked breathing, falling brickwork, whistling wind atop the crane...

Other movies continued to delight. The battle with the Romulan spaceship in *Star Trek* (2009) again highlighted the system's ability to create an immense, effect-filled soundstage; *Superman Returns*, and the sequence where our future hero crashes to Earth, gave the array a chance to really show off its low-frequency prowess.

With its superb design and build – DALI has mixed traditional looks with a bit of modern styling, and I can't see these cabinets being out of place in any environment – this is a fabulous speaker package that I desperately want to own. I'd better get saving ■

SPECIFICATIONS

EPICON 6

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 6.5in wood fibre cones; 1 x 2in ribbon tweeter; 1 x 1in soft textile dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Rear-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 35Hz-30kHz (+/- 3dB)
SENSITIVITY: 88dB
POWER HANDLING: 300W
DIMENSIONS: 1,025(h) x 232(w) x 441(d)mm
WEIGHT: 30kg

EPICON 2

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6.5in wood fibre cone; 1 x 1in soft textile dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Rear-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 47Hz-30kHz (+/- 3dB)
SENSITIVITY: 87dB
POWER HANDLING: 200W
DIMENSIONS: 386(h) x 214(w) x 366(d)mm
WEIGHT: 10.3kg

EPICON VOKAL

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 6.5in wood fibre cones; 1 x 2in ribbon tweeter; 1 x 1in soft textile dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Rear-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 49Hz-30kHz (+/- 3dB)
SENSITIVITY: 89.5dB
POWER HANDLING: 300W
DIMENSIONS: 247(h) x 816(w) x 349(d)mm
WEIGHT: 18.4kg

SUB P-10 DSS

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in active long-throw woofer; 2 x 10in passive long-throw woofers
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 24Hz-250Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 500W
REMOTE CONTROL: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 370(h) x 340(w) x 340(d)mm
WEIGHT: 19.5kg
CONNECTIONS: LFE input; stereo phono input

HCC VERDICT



DALI Epicon 5.1

→ £17,000 Approx → www.dali-uk.co.uk
 → Tel: 0845 644 3537

HIGHS: Gorgeous cabinets and rock-solid build quality; astonishing performance with music and movies; clean, full-bodied, full-range sound
LOWS: Sub only available in black or white; very large centre channel; premium price point

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

MASS appeal

Mark Craven enjoys some multichannel thrills with Monitor Audio's stylish, compact – and affordable – MASS sub/sat system



THIS SYSTEM'S £800 ticket is just the right side of £1,000 (where some people start to sweat when buying speakers), but comfortably high enough to entice audio snobs who won't entertain the idea of a £400 or £500 setup. In terms of design, Monitor Audio is offering something a bit different here. Having failed geometry, I'm not sure exactly what shape each MASS 10 satellite is (look at the photography and decide for yourself), but the tapered top and bottom are easy on the eye.

Completing the package is the MASS W200 sub. It's big, considering the size of its colleagues. A full 38.5cm wide and 42cm high, it rather destroys the MASS system's potential to be a true lifestyle product. Yet, that means it's no half-hearted attempt at the .1 channel, either. Grunt is provided by a 220W amp and its 10in driver is supported by another 10in passive radiator.

A big slice of the MASS system's price will be the cost of its driver technology. Monitor Audio's C-CAM mid-bass cone is a feature of pretty much all the brand's speaker lines, a rigid aluminium/magnesium mashup with a ceramic coating that provides heat dissipation. The tweeters are also C-CAM flavoured, with a gold anodised finish.

Up and running, the MASS 5.1 system gives a good account of itself, easily justifying the price. As you'd expect given the satellites' homogenous nature, there's a smooth sound on show here as material moves around the soundstage. The overriding impression is one of clean high frequencies and a fulsome mid-range, although both scale and sheer output are limited compared to bigger speakers.

The subwoofer, however, has been tailored to make up for these shortcomings. With 5.1 movie mixes, or with music platters running in your AVR's all-channel stereo mode, it adds a slice of weight and size to the whole soundstage, seemingly making the MASS satellites' output larger than it is. This, of course, is the whole point of a sub, and there's a nice sense of integration. *Lynyrd Skynyrd's Greatest Hits* (CD) oozes out of the MAs with foot-tapping panache.

With *Jurassic Park* on Blu-ray, the footfalls of the T-Rex sound suitably ominous and omnipotent and the Hollywood-science dialogue has presence and weight from the centre channel. During sequences like the Gallimimus stampede in Chapter 14, the package puts you in the heart of the action. Spielberg's fleet-footed dinosaurs knock into each other as they race past from the rear of the soundfield to the front, and the sound is crisp, detailed and immersive. Meanwhile, on Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* (Blu-ray), Marc Streitenfeld's memorable score is richly delivered by the C-CAM drivers.

The perfect partner for a mid-range AVR in a living room cinema setup? Oh yes ■

SPECIFICATIONS

MASS 10 SATELLITE

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in C-CAM mid-range driver; 1 x 1in C-CAM tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 80Hz-30kHz
SENSITIVITY: 84dB
POWER HANDLING: 100W
DIMENSIONS: 224(h) x 128(w) x 128(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.65kg

MASS CENTRE

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in C-CAM mid-range driver; 1 x 1in C-CAM tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 80Hz-30kHz
SENSITIVITY: 84dB
POWER HANDLING: 100W
DIMENSIONS: 128(h) x 228(w) x 128(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.65kg

MASS W200 SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in C-CAM long-throw driver; 1 x 10in auxiliary bass radiator
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 40Hz-120Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 220W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 420(h) x 385(w) x 385(d)mm
WEIGHT: 16kg
CONNECTIONS: Stereo phono input; LFE input

HCC VERDICT

Monitor Audio MASS 5.1

→ £800 Approx → www.monitoraudio.co.uk
 → Tel: 01268 740580

HIGHS: Slick multichannel performance; excellent build quality and design; optional stands; good value

LOWS: Speaker terminals are a bit fiddly; limited in scale and output

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Precision engineering

Tannoy has rolled its traditional technology into a tasty new range of upper mid-range speakers.

Ed Selley is very impressed with the results

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
5.1 floorstanding system

POSITION:
Between the Revolution and Definition series

PEERS:
KEF R series;
Monitor Audio GX series;
Acoustic Energy Reference series

OF ALL OF the big British speaker brands still in existence, Tannoy is perhaps the most unusual. In effect there are two Tannoys; the first produces attractive budget and lifestyle speakers that are conventional in design and appearance; the other produces cabinets that are built around the premise of large, highly sensitive speakers that make use of the company's long-standing dual concentric system, where the tweeter is placed inside the axis of the main driver. Many of these speakers – the Prestige range in general – look like they've dropped through a hole in time from 1959 but they are capable of great things.

Where things get interesting is where these two ranges meet. The Definition lineup has already featured in *HCC* and those large, elegant speakers left a very positive impression. Now Tannoy has taken some of the elements of the Definition range and created the smaller Precision series. Like the Definitions, the Precisions are a halfway house

between the visually elegant side of Tannoy and the classic, high-sensitive designs of old.

Going round in circles

At the core of all the Precision models is an all-new version of the brand's Dual Concentric driver. This is a 6in version combining a 1in titanium tweeter in the throat of a wood fibre midbass driver. The latter has a paint finish that, at a glance, might make the driver appear metal but it holds true to the traditional construction methods Tannoy employs. In the case of the smallest member of the range, the 6.1 standmount, it is the only driver in the speaker, but other members of the Precision family also make use of a conventional version of the same midbass unit, less the tweeter.

These drivers are mounted in a cabinet that combines very solid flat front and rear panels with elegantly curved sides – a combination designed to naturally reduce standing waves inside the speaker.

Other tricks, like the Differential Materials Technology system used to couple the driver chassis to the cabinet, are applied with a view to further reduce resonance. In the case of the 6.2 floorstander, attention has been lavished on the plinth, which arrives coupled to the cabinet. It's a very substantial affair that allows for adjustment of the attached spikes from both the top and bottom.

Naturally for Tannoy, the 6.1 standmount and 6.2 floorstander are sold as stereo components – the home cinema-centric parts of our 5.1 package come courtesy of the Precision 6C centre and the TS2.12 subwoofer. The latter is not a member of the Precision

'Build and finish is excellent – these are speakers that you look at and fall in love with immediately'

range as such, having been around for over a year, but is offered by the brand in this multichannel package (and another set that uses the smaller 6.1s for both front and surround duties). The 6C is a serious heavyweight. It shares the same cabinet cross sectional area as the floorstanders, and because Tannoy has decided not to make it reliant on a single Dual Concentric driver and has instead given it an additional pair of bass cones (one passive), you will need to allow it a significant amount of room. A supplied cradle at least aids installation on an AV stand.

The styling of the Precisions owes more than a little to the larger Definition range but the smaller drivers gives them more elegant proportions, and in the case of the floorstanders in particular, these have to be some of the best-looking speakers at or anywhere near the price point. The build and the finish is excellent as well – these are the kind of speakers that you look at and fall in love with immediately.

Ready to rumble

The Precisions have some aspects to their behaviour that is classically Tannoy. They are almost liquid-smooth from top to bottom, and present a soundstage across the front three speakers that is big and completely free from any apparent gaps. The crossover from front to back is equally seamless and the decades of experience with the Dual Concentric drivers makes itself apparent as well. This system produces a soundstage that's very even and free of pronounced sweet spots. Anyone sat remotely on-axis is going to be on the receiving end of a cracking multichannel performance.

This cohesiveness comes into its own when you select something like J.J. Abrams' sci-fi

smash *Super 8* – still something of a master-class Blu-ray disc in terms of going from periods of almost total silence with only sparse details to full-bore moments in barely the blink of an eye. Here, the Tannoys are in their element. The moment where the sheriff is abducted at the gas station is seriously impressive: the calm of the night, with only the ping of the fuel pump to grab attention, is shattered with lightning pace – all hell breaks loose and the Precisions are comfortable with all of it. In fact, the relative sensitivity of the speakers lends them a speed that means that when they need to go from near silence to full tilt, they do so almost instantaneously.

Another of the benefits of these wood fibre drivers is that even under extreme provocation they stay smooth, controlled and detailed – and the integration with the titanium tweeters is extremely good as well. It is effectively impossible to tell when one ends and the other begins.

Dialogue delivery

Tannoy's new speakers also have superb tonality. There's an ability with voices that is genuinely convincing and some of this is clearly down to the 6C centre speaker. It might be a big beast, but the weight and scale that it gives to the onscreen dialogue is effective, putting living, breathing actors right there in your room rather than squawking avatars.

This system can leave even very ballistic soundtracks sounding spacious and real, with convincing panning effects courtesy of the identical drivers employed across all models. Yet, at the same time, the Tannoys possess a sense of effortlessness. At no stage does their performance ever feel forced or showy – they simply take whatever material you present them with and make the best of it. I would never want to describe the Precision array as dull, but there is something relaxed about its presentation that means it's superbly easy to listen to for long periods, compared to other speakers that can begin to tire with their puppyish energy. Music fans are therefore well-catered for, too.

Criticisms are slight. Firstly, the speakers are impressively sensitive but still fairly demanding on their amplification and will show up limitations further upstream. You'll want to match this £4,450 package with an AVR that packs a decent punch. The other area where the system has to give some ground is the subwoofer. The TS2.12 can go impressively deep, but even set to a relatively low crossover I never felt it integrated perfectly with the Precision cabinets. Yes, there are two drivers at work in the chassis – and the TS2.12 is surprisingly agile – but with the rest of the Tannoy cabinets offering such cohesion, it stuck out a little bit. Perhaps a more expensive design from a dedicated subwoofer brand would be worth investigating ■

SPECIFICATIONS

PRECISION 6.2

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6in Dual Concentric with 1in titanium tweeter; 1 x 6in midbass
ENCLOSURE: Rear-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 34Hz-35kHz
SENSITIVITY: 89dB
POWER HANDLING: 350W
DIMENSIONS: 283(w) x 1000(h) x 310(d)mm
WEIGHT: 18.4kg

PRECISION 6.1

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6in Dual Concentric with 1in titanium tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Rear-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 43Hz-35kHz
SENSITIVITY: 88dB
POWER HANDLING: 300W
DIMENSIONS: 224(w) x 330(d) x 257(d)mm
WEIGHT: 7.3kg

PRECISION 6C

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6in Dual Concentric with 1in titanium tweeter; 2 x 6in midbass (one passive)
ENCLOSURE: Passive radiator
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 36Hz-35kHz
SENSITIVITY: 90dB
POWER HANDLING: 350W
DIMENSIONS: 585(w) x 237(h) x 256(d)mm
WEIGHT: 13kg

TS2.12 SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 12in doped paper cones; one active, one passive
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 21Hz-200Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 500W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 440(h) x 378(d)mm

HCC VERDICT



Tannoy Precision 5.1

→ £4,450 Approx → <http://tannoy.com>
→ Tel: 01236 420199

HIGHS: Refined yet potent sound; gorgeous aesthetics and sturdy build; mostly sensible dimensions

LOWS: Subwoofer not quite as capable as the speakers; centre is fairly large

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Towers of power

The R series borrows technology from KEF's Blade flagship. The result, says **Adam Rayner**, is a fantastic high-end lineup

IN THE WORLD of high-end hi-fi, loudspeakers are routinely objects of reverence and desire, no more so than KEF's Blade. Styled like a shark's fin and packing exquisite technology, it's the kind of speaker to make grown men weep. The thing is, manufacturers tend only to offer these flagships in stereo. Home cinema fans have to wait until the brand looks at its cost-no-object product and works out which points of the new item can be made cheaper. This is the story of KEF's R Series, which features new Uni-Q driver technology descended from the top-of-the-range Blade.

The centre speaker here is the R600c, which uses a similar but smaller version of the R900's driver arrangement. Dinkier versions of the centre, floorstander and bookshelf speakers are available should you want a slice of R Series for less money.

Warner Music's *Legends of Jazz* Blu-ray is

a handy disc to have around. Jane Monheit has the voice of an angel and the recording is just sublime. With the KEF R Series, *You Can't Take That Away From Me* came across astonishingly detailed and real; the clarity of her voice, and the delicate edges of the percussion, rare and superb. On another

track, John Pizzarelli's playing is fast but I could follow and hear his pitch-perfect voice as distinct from his instrument. With *Tintin's* 7.1 audio mix, I found the clear hear-everything nature continued, with sublime high frequencies. There's scale, too; the soundstage hung across the screen beyond the confines of the front three speakers. Characters' voices were clear and the bass-end a perfect blend of the speakers' drivers and the subwoofer.

During the opening thunderstorm sequence the fear-inducing dynamism of this system was revealed, with the KEFs tangibly moving some air. In another demo-worthy moment, a man arrives at Tintin's door, only to get shot as he stands there. The impact parts your hair as you hear the bullet's path through the hallway and its woodwork, with perfect detail and almost painful edge at times.

A very big piece of that visceral impact is the £1,000 R400b subwoofer. Its pair of 9in bass drivers are bolted back-to-back and their beautiful aluminium pistons are very fast indeed. There's snap and attack from its twin 250W amplifiers, alongside huge cone travel to really extend its depth. Swapping discs for Guy Ritchie's first *Sherlock Holmes* outing on Blu-ray, and the opening slo-mo fight sequence, showed it to have immense scale.

As for the R800ds, well, I've been sniffy about dipoles in the past, always preferring direct radiating speakers in a 5.1 setup, but I've had my head somewhat turned here. In the scene at Marlinspike Hall where Snowy gets chased by a Rottweiler, the audio goes right

SPECIFICATIONS	
KEF R900	
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5in midbass driver; 1 x 1in tweeter; 2 x 8in low-frequency drivers	
ENCLOSURE: Three-way, ported	
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 40Hz-28kHz	
SENSITIVITY: 90dB POWER HANDLING: 250W	
DIMENSIONS: 359(w) x 1181(h) x 388(d)mm	
WEIGHT: 29.5kg	
KEF R600C	
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5in midbass driver; 1 x 1in tweeter; 2 x 6.5in low-frequency drivers	
ENCLOSURE: Three-way, ported	
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 60Hz-28kHz	
SENSITIVITY: 89dB POWER HANDLING: 200W	
DIMENSIONS: 630(w) x 200(h) x 335(d)mm	
WEIGHT: 13.2kg	
KEF R300	
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5in midbass driver; 1 x 1in tweeter; 1 x 6.5in low-frequency driver	
ENCLOSURE: Three-way, ported	
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 50Hz-28kHz	
SENSITIVITY: 88dB POWER HANDLING: 120W	
DIMENSIONS: 210(w) x 385(h) x 345(d)mm	
WEIGHT: 12kg	
KEF R800DS	
DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 5.25in midbass drivers; 2 x 1in tweeters	
ENCLOSURE: Two-and-a-half-way dipole	
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 100Hz-28kHz	
SENSITIVITY: 85dB POWER HANDLING: 100W	
DIMENSIONS: 350(w) x 180(h) x 184(d)mm	
WEIGHT: 7.4kg	
KEF R400B	
DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 9in woofers	
ENCLOSURE: Sealed, bipolar arrangement	
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 26Hz-140Hz	
ON BOARD POWER: 2 x 250W	
REMOTE CONTROL: No	
DIMENSIONS: 330(w) x 365(h) x 351(d)mm	
WEIGHT: 21.5kg	

HCC VERDICT

KEF R Series

→ £6,500 Approx → www.kef.com
→ Tel: 01622 672 261

HIGHS: Superb performance suited both to delicate music and terrifying actioners; awesome build quality; sensibly priced
LOWS: You may hanker for rounded edges to the cabinets; attaching the plinths is a chore...

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

through the soundstage and this KEF system spat out deep growls that travelled all down one side. These quirky-looking dipoles offer both punch and dispersion.

Serious contender

This R Series lineup provides a ridiculously high-end performance and output for the cost. I'd have expected the price tag to be at least half as much again. These are therefore a serious contender for a high-end dedicated cinema room. I love them ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

7.1 array with both dipoles and direct radiating speakers

POSITION:

Below the Reference range, but above the Q and C Series

PEERS:

Monitor Audio GX; Tannoy Definition; B&W 600 Series

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Make mine a large one

Below its higher-end ThemeScene models Optoma offers a bevy of budget light-cannons, and **John Archer** reckons the HD25 is well worth its £800 price tag



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; 2 x D-Sub PC ports; component video; composite video; 2 x analogue audio inputs; VGA output; analogue audio output; 3D Sync port; RS-232
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 2,000 ANSI Lumens
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 20,000:1
DIMENSIONS: 324(w) x 97(h) x 234(d)mm
WEIGHT: 3.1kg
FEATURES: DynamicBlack auto contrast system; Brilliant Colour; colour management; gamma adjustments; one pair of 3D glasses included; built-in 10W speaker system with SRS WOW processing; +/- 40-degree vertical keystone correction; 6,000-hour claimed lamp life in Eco mode

OPTOMA'S HD25 IS one of a number of sub-£1,000 projectors, fighting in a market place that targets both casual users and home cinema enthusiasts on tight budgets. Price-wise, it's a bargain, but does the performance also get the thumbs-up?

In terms of design, it's passably attractive by budget standards, thanks to its gloss white finish and curved forward edge. Occasional users will appreciate its small, cupboard-friendly footprint.

Setup assistance

Most affordable PJs now carry surprisingly extensive picture calibration systems, and the DLP-based HD25 is no different, including gamma and colour management. Both of these proved handy in correcting some yellow and red colour errors in the presets. Colours also benefitted from reducing the HD25's Brilliant Colour mode to its halfway level, to

avoid a cooling in the overall colour tone.

While the HD25's menus contain a good array of adjustments, it doesn't score very highly where its physical setup aids are concerned, with limited 1.2:1 zoom and no vertical imaging shifting. Therefore, unless you're flexible about where you can

site the PJ, you may need to use the distorting properties of keystone correction.

After making adjustments, the HD25 delivered a seriously enjoyable picture for its money. Contrast levels are particularly impressive, with sequences like the early forays down the mine in *There Will Be Blood* displaying deep blacks. A residual gentle veil of greyness slightly obscures some subtle shadow detailing, but it's less pervasive than you've any right to expect for £800. Calibrated colours also look good; not as vivid as some rivals, but certainly more natural.

The Optoma handles moving material surprisingly credibly, suffering little dot crawl noise or judder. Pictures exude sharpness – not forensically so, but enough to do very intricate Blu-rays like *Prometheus* justice.

3D playback initially generated some issues, as the menus kept defaulting back to the DLP Link format (instead of VESA 3D). Also, pictures were sporadically spoiled by a 'flashing static' phenomenon only fixed by powering the PJ off/on. A second unit with new firmware fixed the menu problem and hugely reduced the occurrences of the 'flashing'.

With the 3D gremlins largely dismissed, the HD25's 3D impresses. Pictures are bright and colourful, and deliver enough contrast to retain a decent impression of depth even during *Prometheus*'s most murky moments. There's practically zero crosstalk ghosting, either.

It runs a little noisily, and I was distracted on occasion by the DLP rainbow effect, but the Optoma's contrast and colour accuracy make it a great choice for cash-strapped AV fans ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Affordable Full HD 3D DLP projector

POSITION:
Below the HD30 and LED-based HD91 in Optoma's projector stable

PEERS:
BenQ W1030;
Epson EH-TW5200;
Vivitek H1080

HCC VERDICT

Optoma HD25

→ £800 Approx → www.optoma.co.uk
 → Tel: 01923 691 800

HIGHS: Capable of accurate, contrast-rich pictures; 3D glasses included; great value

LOWS: A little rainbow effect; shifting operating noise tones; needs initial calibration work; initial sample required firmware update

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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- 12V trigger for simple screen/projector automation functionality
- Built-in 5W audio speaker



Instantly impressive

BenQ's budget offering needs only a few minor tweaks to serve up solid HD images. And that suits lazy-bones **John Archer** perfectly



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; component video; 12V trigger; PC port; USB for service; composite video; S-Video; analogue audio input
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 2,000 ANSI Lumens
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 10,000:1
DIMENSIONS: 312(w) x 109(h) x 244(d)
WEIGHT: 2.65kg
FEATURES: ISF certified; 10W built-in speakers; Smart Eco dynamic lighting system; colour and gamma management; small amount of vertical image shift; 1.3:1 zoom; 6,000-hour lamp life (Smart Eco mode)

THE BENQ W1070 wears its chief attraction right out there on its price tag. For despite being a 3D-capable projector claiming decent-looking contrast ratio and brightness figures of 10,000:1 and 2,000 ANSI Lumens respectively, it costs just £700. Admittedly, this doesn't get you a free pair of 3D glasses, but it's a tempting price all the same.

The W1070 is strikingly small, making it well suited to the casual projection market. It's also quite attractive, with a blend of gloss white and matt silver elements – though its build quality is a tad flimsy.

The best design attribute is that it includes a vertical shift system. This requires a screwdriver to access it, and the extent of shift on offer isn't very extensive, but finding any vertical shifting at the W1070's price point is a boon. Less impressive is the puny amount of optical zoom on offer, which could present some users with tricky positioning issues, or resorting to digital zoom, which is never really advised.

The W1070's connections are solid, including two HDMI's, a component video port, a D-Sub PC port, composite and S-Video standard-def video options, and, surprisingly, a 12V trigger port. There are audio jacks to feed its 10W speaker array.

The W1070's onscreen menus, meanwhile, contain a

surprise: an ISF mode that an Imaging Science Foundation engineer can use to calibrate the projector to your specific room setup.

Strong performer

First impressions of the W1070's pictures are strong – once, at least, I'd turned off the noise-inducing Brilliant Colour feature and figured out that the 'Smart Eco' mode was actually a decent dynamic contrast system. With these changes made the W1070 produces a startlingly effective contrast performance, delivering even trickily-lit sequences, like the scene where Hudson gets munched in *Aliens*, with surprising dynamism and conviction. I noted minimal evidence of DLP's rainbow effect, even over such RGB stripe-inducing fare as the white *Alien* title against a backdrop of space at the opening of Ridley Scott's classic.

Black levels aren't as deep as you might hope for, and colours lack a little nuance. There is, though, a punchy look to its pictures that seems well-suited to everyday environments, and aside from the Brilliant Colour feature, I also felt comfortable with the projector's out-of-box presets.

The W1070 makes good use of a Full HD native resolution to deliver a winningly sharp picture – sharpness that doesn't break down when there's lots of motion to handle, either. And the BenQ is a commendable 3D performer, joining other DLP projectors in being almost completely free of crosstalk ghosting, and delivering reasonably bright images. A slight lack of contrast, though, means dark scenes like those in the alien tunnels in *Prometheus* lack a little depth ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Affordable Full HD 3D DLP projector

POSITION: One of a number of budget BenQ models – above some 720p PJs

PEERS: Optoma HD25; Epson EH-TW5200; Vivitek H1080

HCC VERDICT

BenQ W1070

→ £700 Approx → www.benq.co.uk
 → Tel: 0870 850 4417

HIGHS: Exceptional value; strong out of the box picture performance; ISF certified

LOWS: Pictures are a touch noisy; dark 3D scenes lack a little depth; no 3D glasses included for free

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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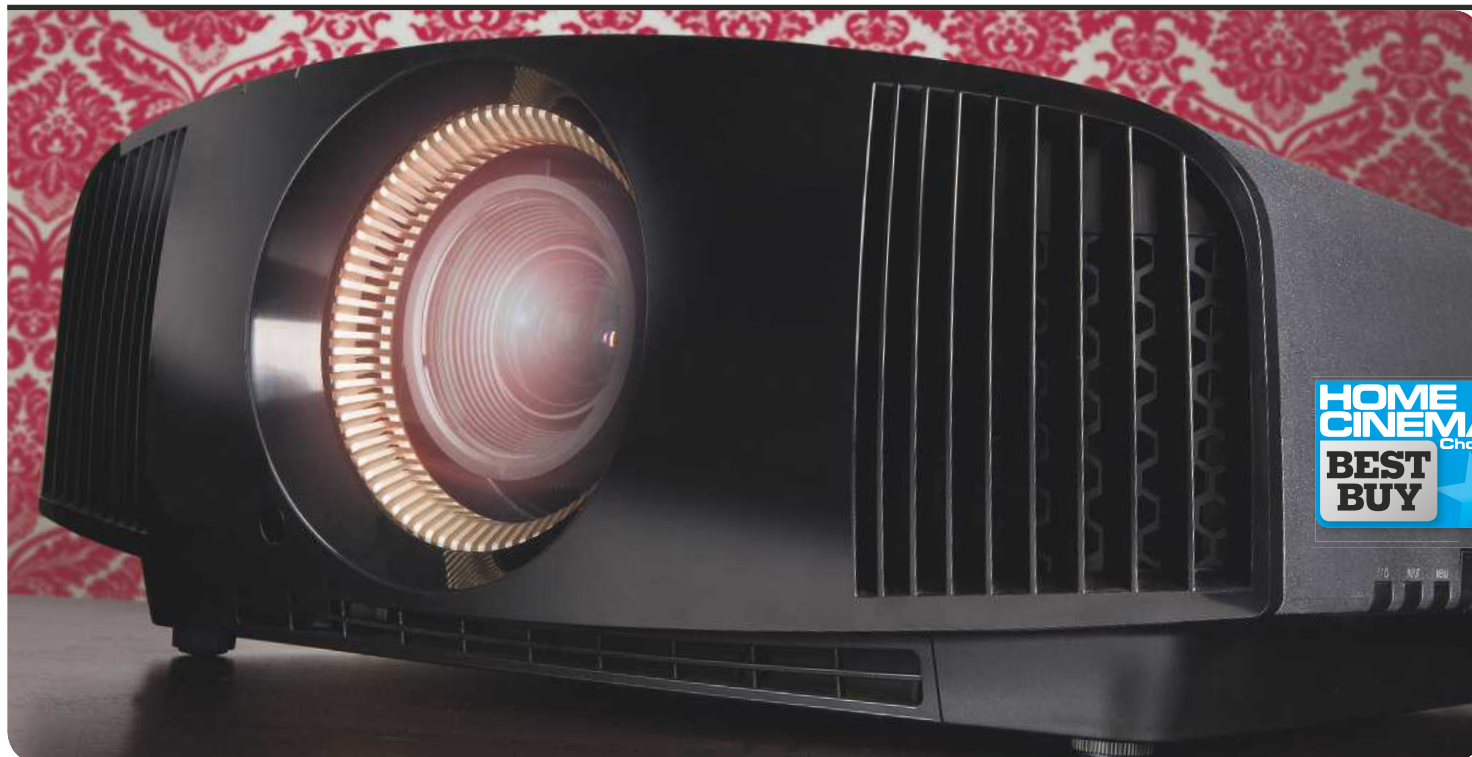
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Sony strides ahead of the pack

By offering native 4K compatibility and high-quality HD upscaling, the VPL-VW500ES is nothing short of a home cinema revolution, reckons **John Archer**



Sony doesn't offer app control – so don't lose this handset

WITH RIVAL PROJECTION technologies struggling to get their 4K acts together, Sony has been quick to seize the next-gen initiative with its SXR system, and having launched the stellar 4K-resolution VPL-VW1000ES around 18 months ago, it's now out to blow your minds with the VPL-VW500ES.

The 'killer app' of this new PJ is that it gives you genuine 4K pictures for £8,800 – a price which pitches it into the same price category occupied by good-quality HD projectors like JVC's DLA-X75 and DLA-X95. And making its price even more astonishing is the VPL-VW500ES's specification. Far from being some painfully stripped-down version of the VPL-VW1000ES, in some ways its spec exceeds that of its pricier predecessor.

Particularly eye-catching is its use of Triluminos quantum dot colour technology, designed to produce a more expansive colour range than a normal projection colour system. The VPL-VW500ES's SXR chips seem

startlingly uncompromised, too, with a claimed response time of 2.5 milliseconds – a figure that leaves rival LCD projectors for dead and should help 4K's gorgeous clarity remain intact even when there's motion in the picture.

Similar benefits should arise from Sony's Motionflow engine, which includes a new Combination mode that mixes Sony's previous Film Projection and Motion Enhancer features to, allegedly, deliver 'ultra-smooth, dot-free pictures with natural, fluid movement'. Though to be honest, I still remain inherently sceptical regarding motion processing systems.

Upscaling of non-4K content, meanwhile, comes courtesy of Sony's Reality Creation suite, which worked a treat on the VPL-VW1000ES and Sony's first 4K TVs.

Let someone else do the work...

Another welcome feature of the VPL-VW500ES is an Auto Calibration engine where the projector can periodically recalibrate itself

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
The first 4K projector to break the £10,000 price barrier

POSITION:
Sony's new entry-level 4K PJ, below the in-bound VPL-VW1000ES

PEERS:
JVC DLA-X75;
JVC DLA-X95

to its original factory conditions, using a built-in colour sensor, to compensate for changes to its picture's characteristics that can occur over time. There's also a picture position memory function, so those with 2.35:1 screens can establish lens settings for different aspect ratios, removing the need for an external anamorphic lens attachment.

The PJ offers an excellent 2.06x level of optical zoom and loads of vertical and horizontal image shift. The shift, focus and zoom features can all be adjusted by buttons on the remote, and you can integrate the Sony into a wider home control/automation system via RS232, RJ45 and IR terminals.

Talking of connections, the VPL-VW500ES carries two HDMI built to the latest 4K HDMI standard, though it must be stressed that not

'The Sony's upscaling is so good I wouldn't have believed it if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes'

all HDMI 2.0 connections are equal. Unlike the port on Panasonic's L65WT600 TV, which can handle 60fps 8bit 4K/UHD with 4:4:4 colour sampling, the HDMI on the VPL-VW500ES can, I'm told, only deliver 4:2:0 sampling at 60fps, so that images lose a little colour precision. Triluminos technology, though, may be able to compensate for this.

Compact cinema

The VPL-VW500ES is a surprisingly compact unit considering what's going on inside, and it looks pretty too with its arched top, large central lens, and sparkly, textured finish.

Naturally I kicked off the testing phase with native 4K material (predominantly fed from a Sony 4K server). And for the most part the results looked every bit as amazing as I'd hoped they would. Detail levels are incredible. All the classic detail indicators like the weaves in clothes, individual blades of grass, facial pores, leaves on trees and so on are present and correct, rendered precisely and densely. And the fast response of Sony's SXRD chipsets means that even 4K footie footage from the 2012 World Cup appears without blurring or judder to spoil the show, while the unit's imaging system makes it virtually impossible to pick out visible pixel structure in the image – even when I stuck my face right up to my 90in test screen.

4K isn't just about more detail, of course. Native 3,860 x 2,160 images enjoy a much greater depth of field, with the myriad pixels enabling the image to resolve detail much further into the distance. Also, having four times as many pixels means colours can be

rendered with what feels like infinite subtlety. Blends and tonal shifts are exquisite. Sony's Triluminos system enhances this sense of colour resolution even further, leaving richly-hued material looking so good it's been known to make grown cinephiles cry. Probably.

As for the VPL-VW500ES's handling of HD, its upscaling talents prove so good I wouldn't have believed it if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes. Essentially, the projector adds high levels of detail and resolution to Blu-ray sources without either exaggerating source noise or leaving movies looking excessively gritty. The final *Harry Potter...* Blu-ray is a particularly tough test for any upscaling engine thanks to its tricky, dark colour palette and grainy finish, yet the Sony handles it brilliantly, adding loads of pixel density and detail without being overbearing.

Upscaled colours impress too, delivering fine blends and natural tones that look only marginally less precise than those obtained from native 4K images.

The VPL-VW500ES has just one real flaw. When watching dark scenes, like the night battles in *Glory*, it can't reproduce black levels as deep, rich, stable and convincing as JVC's D-ILA projectors, which are its only real rivals at this price point. If you try to boost black levels by using the dynamic iris you're regularly irked by quite strong jumps in the image's overall brightness level. Yet, without the dynamic iris, there's a greyiness to parts of the picture that should look black, and this can only be completely combatted by removing more brightness from the picture than I felt comfortable with. It's by no means a bad black level performance, just not best-in-class.

The last part of the VPL-VW500ES's performance to test is its 3D handling, and here again it delivers the goods. Since it uses active 3D technology the projector upscales 3D Blu-rays to 4K – and it does it so well that it's again clear that the unit's upscaling engine outperforms the projector's price point by a huge margin. Stereoscopic sources are taken to above-HD levels of detail and given a gorgeous sense of extra density perfectly suited to the effect.

Fast-moving 3D material is displayed credibly considering the level of processing going on, and the projector keeps a tight rein on crosstalk noise. You can still see double imaging over distant picture areas, but it's always subtle.

In a class of its own

I love the VPL-VW500ES. There may be other projectors in its class that offer richer contrast performances, but there's no other model at anything like its price point that offers the many, varied and stunning advantages associated with genuine 4K imaging. And there's no overstating the importance of its upscaling skills either ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active

ULTRA HD: Yes. 4,096 x 2,160

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI (v2.0); Ethernet service port; RS232; IR input; 2 x 12V triggers; USB port

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,700 ANSI Lumens

CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 200,000:1 (dynamic)

DIMENSIONS: 496(w) x 195(h) x 467(d)mm

WEIGHT: 14kg

FEATURES: SXRD projector; DCI resolution; optional wireless HD unit available; colour management; Triluminos colour system; Motionflow video processing; picture position memory; auto calibration system; 4K Reality Creation; 2.06x motorized zoom; horizontal/vertical lens shift; UHP 265W lamp; 5,000-hour lamp life, nine picture presets; 26dB running noise

HCC VERDICT



Sony VPL-VW500ES

→ £8,800 Approx → www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 8466 555

HIGHS: Native 4K looks incredible; upscaled HD looks nearly as good; remarkably affordable for a 4K projector; excellent colour reproduction

LOWS: Contrast is bettered by JVC's D-ILA projectors; slight crosstalk with 3D; 3D spex are optional

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

X marks the spot

JVC's entry-level D-ILA home cinema projector picks up where most of its rivals leave off.

Steve May goes to the movies



ALTHOUGH PRICED AT under £3,000, there's not a lot to suggest that the DLA-X35 is an entry-level projector. For starters, it's beautifully built with a substantial chassis that tips the scales at just under 15kg. Connectivity comprises two HDMI, component and PC VGA inputs, plus Ethernet, RS232 and a 12V trigger. Ethernet is only used for control and not content delivery, while the trigger is used to sync the projector with electric screens. The projector is also 3D compatible, and is bundled with two pairs of active shutter glasses.

The DLA-X35 offers a variety of setup and calibration options. A 2x motorised zoom lens and integrated test pattern makes short work of sizing and focus; there's also 80 per cent vertical and 34 per cent horizontal lens shift available. Brightness is rated at 1,300 Lumens and native contrast ratio set at 50,000:1.

It's worth remembering that rival imaging technology needs to use a dynamic iris to get anywhere near that number.

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 3D compatible D-ILA home cinema projector

POSITION: Below the first of JVC's 4K e-shift models

PEERS: Sony VPL-HW50ES; Panasonic PT-AT6000E

Up and running

Once installed and calibrated, the most immediate impression is one of eerie silence. This bigscreen hero is whisper-quiet and although the brightness spec may seem a tad low, the projector is perky

enough to run on the low lamp setting without incurring any visual penalties. The dynamics of its images ensure a lively sparkle regardless.

The simple fact is the DLA-X35 is an astonishingly good performer, offering rich, cinematic images. JVC continues to set a benchmark when it comes to black level performance and dynamics, one that other brands struggle to match. The amount of shadow detail and depth available is considerable. When the *Black Widow* is being tortured at the opening of *Avengers Assemble*, you can stare deep into the shadowy recesses of the warehouse, giving the sequence a three-dimensional feel without recourse to any funny glasses. Greyscale tracking is excellent. A 20/20 black-to-white test chart looked superb, while colour gradations are velvety smooth.

2D image sharpness is equally considerable; textures and fine detail zing from Blu-ray and broadcast HD sources alike, particularly when you utilize (sparingly) the Detail Enhance tool. A 120Hz Clear Motion Drive does a reasonable job with motion resolution, minimizing blur without overcooking the video sheen characteristic of faster refresh rates. There's a real visceral pop to its colour performance, too.

The PJ's 3D handling is less satisfactory, in so much that it's susceptible to double imaging – although there is crosstalk cancellation offered to mitigate against this, and screen brightness doesn't suffer as the JVC's Frame Addressing driver tech cranks up to compensate.

Overall, the DLA-X35 can be deemed a superior projector capable of a high level of performance, and ideal for a dedicated room ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter (two pairs of RF glasses supplied)

ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI v1.4; component video; D-Sub input; 12V trigger; Ethernet (service only); RS-232

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,300 ANSI Lumens

CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): 50,000:1 (native)

DIMENSIONS: 455(w) x 179(h) x 472(d)mm

WEIGHT: 14.8kg

FEATURES: 3 x D-ILA 0.7in panels; 3D compatible (frame sequential/side-by-side/top and bottom); 230W NSH lamp; backlit remote control; 120Hz Clear Motion Drive; 16-step lens with a double aperture; five-mode lens memory function; anamorphic mode; 2x motorised zoom; smartphone app control; Pixel Adjust; 2D-3D conversion; RF 3D sync emitter; 23dB running noise; 4,000-hour lamp life; horizontal and vertical lens shift; 100in image from 3.01m/200in from 6.06m

HCC VERDICT

JVC DLA-X35

→ £2,900 Approx → www.jvc.co.uk

→ Tel: 0845 310 8000

HIGHS: Outstanding Full HD image quality; low operational noise; versatile setup and calibration options; RF 3D system

LOWS: Bulky; 3D suffers from crosstalk double imaging

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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The award-winning Home Entertainment specialist

Meet the inbetweener

The projector giant Epson has plugged a mid-range gap in its home cinema range to impressive effect, reckons a penny-pinching **John Archer**



EPSON'S EH-TW8100 SITS between the brand's TW6100 and TW9100 models, although its spec puts it closer to the TW9100, and its £2,250 price is also slightly closer to the flagship model, costing around £350 less. This is still a significant saving on the TW9100, though – especially when you realise that the TW8100 achieves this cheaper price by making only three specification compromises.

First, the TW8100 ditches the TW9100's ISF certification, meaning you can't have it professionally calibrated by an ISF engineer. Second, you don't get any free Epson 3D glasses (you get two pairs with the TW9100). And finally, unlike the TW9100, the TW8100 can't be fitted with an anamorphic lens.

The TW9100's ISF and anamorphic lens features are aimed squarely at the true AV enthusiast, so many relatively mainstream movie fans may not miss them much.

In other ways this model matches its flagship brethren. It claims the same

impressive 320,000:1 contrast ratio, the same high 2,400 Lumens of maximum brightness, the same 480Hz panel driving system and a near identical design.

Getting started

Setup is a breeze. For starters, there are straightforward vertical and

horizontal image shifting wheels, making it easy to avoid keystone 'distortions'. At 2.1x, meanwhile, the optical zoom is outstanding.

Testing began with *The Dark Knight Rises*, and the Epson did a very good job. The unit's handling of the film's frequent dark scenes was impressive. As Batman battles Bane in the latter's underground base, for instance, I was struck both by how deep and true images look, and by how much shadow detail information the Epson retains even in the inkiest corners. Fine detail levels are high, too. The TW8100 does full justice to the gorgeous textures, subtleties and cinematic grain of Warner's beautifully produced Blu-ray. Ultra HD/4K may be grabbing the column inches at the moment, but there's certainly life in Full HD yet.

Also strong is the TW8100's colour handling. Nolan employs a demanding palette that combines many different lighting conditions and skin tones, yet the TW8100 replicates them all very well, except for a slight tendency to over-egg oranges and reds during mid-dark sequences.

The good news continues with running noise. Using the Eco lamp setting, the amount of whining made by the cooling fans is negligible. However, it does go up quite a bit if you switch to the Normal lamp mode for viewing in ambient light or watching 3D.

It's always possible to wish for more from any mid-range PJ. Deeper black levels and an even better colour accuracy/balance are two areas that more expensive rivals deliver on, and input lag at 60ms is quite high. Yet the TW8100 does most things right ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter (but no glasses supplied)

ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080

CONNECTIONS: 2 x v1.4 HDMI; D-Sub PC port; 12V trigger jack; RS-232; component video input; composite video input

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 2,400 ANSI Lumens

CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 320,000:1

DIMENSIONS: 466(w) x 395(d) x 140(h)mm

WEIGHT: 8.4kg

FEATURES: 0.74in with C2 Fine LCD panel; side-by-side/top and bottom/frame sequential 3D compatible; Frame Interpolation; noise reduction; colour management; gamma management; 480Hz panel driving; 5,000-hour lamp life in Eco mode; 22dB fan noise; 30-300in image size; vertical and horizontal lens shift; 2.1x optical zoom; keystone correction

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Full HD LCD projector

POSITION:
Mid-range option in Epson's 3D home cinema PJ series

PEERS:
Panasonic PT-AE6000; Sony VPL-HW30ES

HCC VERDICT

Epson EH-TW8100

→ £2,250 Approx → www.epson.co.uk

→ Tel: 0871 423 7766

HIGHS: Very good 2D and 3D pictures; runs quietly; easy to set up

LOWS: Minor convergence errors; slightly high input lag; no free 3D glasses

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

P R I M A R E

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Hi Fi News, February 2012



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Shifting the HD goalposts

John Archer reacquaints himself with JVC's 4K e-shift technology, and welcomes its availability at a lower price point



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080 (but has '4K' e-shift solution)
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; component video input; RS-232 terminal; 12V trigger jack; remote jack; Ethernet; 3D Sync for attaching included transmission 'dongle'
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,200 Lumens
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 50,000:1
DIMENSIONS: 455(w) x 179(h) x 472(d)mm
WEIGHT: 15.1kg
FEATURES: Colour management system; optical wire grid polarising technology; Clear Motion Drive processing option; 4,000-hour lamp life in normal mode; 2x optical motorized zoom; motorised focus; horizontal and vertical image shifting; 230W lamp; 4K e-shift 2 technology

JVC'S DLA-X55 MODEL makes the brand's 4K e-shift technology available at a price point of £5,000 (versus the near £7,000 asking price of the previous DLA-X70). For those unfamiliar with 4K e-shift, it's essentially a clever attempt to give Full HD images the sort of pixel density you would get with a 4K (3,840 x 2,160) image. It does this by using two Full HD imaging devices positioned in sequence, with the second one half a pixel upwards and left of the first. This means images passed through the two imaging devices are made up from double the number of pixels they would be in a normal projector.

The DLA-X55 isn't a true 4K machine. It can't take in 4K sources for starters. What JVC's e-shift technology definitely can do, though, is make images look crisper and more 'dense', avoiding the sensation of visible line structure and slight softness some HD

projectors can suffer with when beamed onto large screens.

Get tweaking

As well as e-shift, the JVC's other claim to fame is its fine-tuning features – including a colour management system previously only available on more expensive models from the brand.

Put to work with my *Skyfall* Blu-ray, the JVC dazzles from the opening scene. Especially potent is the image's dynamism, even when using one of the relatively calm image presets, such as Film or Cinema. I'm used to seeing JVC's D-ILA projectors excelling with the reproduction of dark scenes and black colours – this has been the foundation of their success since 2007's ground-breaking HD1. But here these stunning black levels are partnered by high levels of brightness and colour vibrancy. Numerous sequences in *Skyfall*, such as those in MI6's underground technology observation 'bunker', become truly mesmerising.

Colours aren't over-cooked, though. Subtle is the word here, able to delineate without a trace of striping, and tiny tonal nuances even during tricky sequences like the red-soaked shots of *Skyfall* burning against the night sky. The colour range is extreme too, ensuring that after a little tweaking nothing about the palette looks forced or unbalanced.

JVC's e-shift 2 technology is likely playing a part in this flawless colour handling, given its delivery of more 'pixels' per inch, and there's no doubt that e-shift 2 helps the *Skyfall* Blu-ray appear super crisp and detailed. It also delivers on its promise of removing any visible pixel 'grid' structure. This makes movies feel more real. You forget about the technology at play, and focus on the image itself.

The bottom line is that I've fallen in love with the DLA-X55. It delivers unprecedented picture quality for its price point. Grab an audition at once! ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
D-ILA active 3D
Full HD projector

POSITION:
A fourth addition
to JVC's usual
three-model lineup,
a step up from the
entry-level DLA-X35

PEERS:
Sony VPL-VW95ES;
Runco LS-1

HCC VERDICT

JVC DLA-X55

→ £5,000 Approx → www.jvc.co.uk
→ Tel: 0845 310 8000

HIGHS: Sensational 2D picture quality; very good 3D images; good setup flexibility

LOWS: Minor motion flaws with 3D; runs a touch noisily with lamp set to normal; out of the box picture presets could be better; a little bulky

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

In-Wall Bluetooth Amplifier

A compact Digital In-Wall Amplifier that fits into a standard sized 2 gang wall plate. Ideal for adding music to your kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, study etc. Choose from the built in FM radio (10 channel presets), rear line inputs, plug your MP3 directly into the front aux jack or even stream music to it via Bluetooth! Smooth tactile moisture resistant front panel for operation plus IR remote control. Digital Class D design means high efficiency with minimal heat produced.

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Code PU513L £250.75

Digital to Analogue Audio Converter with USB

This DAC has all of the inputs and outputs the everyday audiophile will need. One optical, one coaxial, and one USB inputs are enough for most applications. Up to three digital sources – Blu-ray player, cable box, CD player, computer, DVD player, HD games console, media player and set-top box etc. can be connected concurrently using S/PDIF coaxial, toslink optical inputs or USB port. DAC is the ideal converter for music lovers seeking an excellent value upgrade to 24 bit advanced HD (high definition) audio.

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- Connect stereo output to power amplifier for playback over speakers
- Adjustable headphone output is provided for personal listening
- Power supply (5 VDC) either USB or external USB power adaptor



Code DAC £39.00

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Code IRBKITS £48.00

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- 100% HDCP compliant
- Sends the HD signal uncompressed



Code GV821 £265.00

IP Mains Switch

IP controllable mains power switch with two independent mains outlets:

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- Full browser based set-up and timer configuration
- Switch between 4 HD sources
- Adjustable power fail re-start options allow each switch to delay up to 255 seconds before switching on. Ideal for remote re-start of systems that require 2 stage start ups
- 3 timer events per switch with daily, weekly or monthly repeats
- During each timer event the switch can be set to either on or off
- Control 4 drivers are available



Code IPMSW1 £119.99

HDMI to Component Video Converter

Takes in HDMI and gives out Component Video (Y-Pb-Pr) and stereo audio allowing you to view on older component TVs or projectors that do not have an HDMI input.

- Input: 1 x HDMI
- Output: 1 x Component Video, 1 x Stereo Audio, 1 x Coaxial Digital Audio
- Easy to Use: Installs in seconds, no settings and it is a resolution pass-through converter
- Audio output format: 2 channel LPCM
- HDMI resolutions: 480P@60Hz, 576P@50Hz, 720P@50/60Hz, 1080i@50/60Hz
- HDCP v1.1 Compliant



Code HDCVC £69.00

HDMI Distribution Amplifiers

These Coosis HDMI Distribution amplifiers are compact devices that give multiple simultaneous HDMI outputs from one HDMI input, ideal for viewing on multiple displays. The units can also be cascaded together in a "pyramid" network to provide a one-to-many solution.

Please note: If the max resolutions of your displays are different, the EDID functionality will detect all the connected displays' EDID information and automatch the output resolution to the lower one. For example, if one display supports 720P resolution and the rest support 1080P, the signal will be lowered to 720p for all displays.

Code HDC12 1 HDMI input to 2 HDMI outputs

£34.99

Code HDC14 1 HDMI input to 4 HDMI outputs

£74.99

Code HDC18 1 HDMI input to 8 HDMI outputs

£114.99



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Code VGAHDMIP

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Future 4K revealed

With the launch of its first Ultra HD TV, Panasonic has thrown open the doors to a high frame-rate future, says **Steve May**



4K/ULTRA HD MAY

be widely accepted as the next step from 1080p Full HD, but even broadcasters have yet to agree a specification. While BSkyB looks certain to go with 2160p at 50/60Hz for its sports coverage, the BBC is rumoured to want native frame rates to top 100Hz. For brands eager to punt 4K screens this is all rather inconvenient, not least because TVs prior to this Panasonic model are tethered to 4K at 30Hz, thanks to the limitations of current v1.4 HDMI chippiness. The arrival of the world's first HDMI 2.0 compliant screen, complete with full 18Gbps bandwidth, is a game-changer.

This is also the first consumer telly to offer a DisplayPort input; a connection more commonly associated with Apple laptops and PC graphics cards.

Its inclusion here is something of a masterstroke – while the WT600 may have an HDMI 2.0 input, it still has to wait until someone produces a source with a compatible output. DisplayPort can deliver 3,840 x 2,160 content at 60Hz from a compatible PC graphics card. I used it

to hook up a media server brimming with high frame-rate UHD content. The material, comprising show jumping and car racing, proved jaw-droppingly beautiful, both in terms of detail and smoothness. Travelogue footage, including a weather-beaten but richly detailed Rikers Island, as well as after-dark sequences of Las Vegas glittering with pinpoint lighting, offered a level of screen realism that Full HD just doesn't come close to. It's like swapping out your double-glazing for prescription glass.

As an oversized Ultra HD gaming monitor, the panel is equally spectacular. Playing *Project Cars* at 60Hz via DisplayPort on a 65in screen is probably the nearest you'll ever get to a full-on race simulator. An increasing number of graphics cards support 4K and a growing selection of gaming titles should help pass the time until UHD video content is commonplace.

In addition to native 4K, the set proves adept at upscaling Blu-ray, with a database of 120,000 textures used to interpolate additional detail. Black levels don't quite match the reference depths of the brand's plasmas, but they are stable, and the colour punch of this LED-lit panel is excellent.

The TX-L65WT600 is the first 4K/UHD screen to really give a taste of tomorrow's viewing experience, and it's an extraordinary piece of kit. Even the price tag seems astonishingly reasonable ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter (two pairs of glasses supplied)

ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,860 x 2,160

TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freeview HD; 2 x Freesat HD

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI (including 1 x HDMI 2.0); AV adaptor for component/Scart/composite; 3 x USB; digital optical audio output; Ethernet; SD card slot; DisplayPort 1.2a

SOUND: 18W (2 x 4W, plus 10W woofer)

BRIGHTNESS: N/A

CONTRAST RATIO: N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,468(w) x 863(h) x 56(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 38kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Hexa Processing Engine; Intelligent Frame Creation; apps portal; My Home Screen UI; 4K web browser; Skype; USB hard drive recording; USB media playback; DLNA media playback; SD card media playback; 4K Swipe & Share; Bluetooth touchpad remote control; voice interaction

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

The world's first HDMI 2.0 4K/UHD LED TV

POSITION:

Panasonic's solitary 4K flag-bearer

PEERS:

Sony KD-65X9005A; Samsung UE65F9000

HCC VERDICT

Panasonic TX-L65WT600

→ £5,400 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

HIGHS: Outstanding native 50/60Hz 4K image quality; HDMI 2.0 compatible; DisplayPort 1.2a compatible; excellent My Home Screen interface; high-quality upscaling

LOWS: Mediocre audio performance; limited catch-up TV services

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

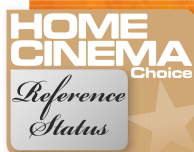


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tannoy.com



Plasma's last stand

With Panasonic's ZT65, plasma technology may well have reached its zenith. If only it wasn't a 'limited edition', says **Steve May**

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
High-end 60in Full HD plasma TV

POSITION:
The very top of Panasonic's consumer range

PEERS:
Samsung PS64F8500;
Panasonic TX-P65VT55

THE PANASONIC TX-P60ZT65 casts a longer shadow than its slender frame might suggest. It is, says its creators, the final word in plasma panel development. The most advanced PDP design to roll off Panasonic's production line, albeit in limited quantities, the brand says it simply can't take the technology further. So what we have here is the culmination of years of development, with a lineage that can be traced back through both Panasonic and Pioneer. The result is the best Full HD image you can buy today.

Let's dwell on that observation for just a few minutes: the ZT65 delivers unquestionably, unreservedly, undeniably the best 1080p picture in town. Its images are astonishingly crisp, yet without processing artifice, offering more subtle gradation than anything that has gone before. Panasonic says this Ultimate Black panel is capable of 30,720 steps of gradation, thanks to its fastest-ever subfield driver. This translates to a photographic

authenticity to its presentation that's beguiling. When the TV powers up, it flashes 'Studio Master Panel' as a knowing proclamation that you're about to see something rather special, and then delivers exactly that.

The voice of the future

Smart functionality on this premium plasma is high; beneath the lid, a multi-core processor makes everything swift to navigate. The set also utilises voice recognition, powered by Nuance Communication's Dragon software. You can use conversational commands for a variety of control and search functions. The set also has a tendency to speak at the drop of a hat, even inviting you to take a narrated tour of its many features and functions during setup.

Cosmetically, the ZT65 looks gorgeous; the glass and metal design is classic minimalist chic. Nothing disturbs its clean lines. The high-necked pedestal stand is distinctive,



Two remotes: the standard zapper is weightier than usual

although it necessitates using cable ties to hide connection spaghetti.

As befits a panel very much aimed at enthusiasts, there's some deep calibration on offer here, with modes designed to satisfy the most obsessive videophiles. However, not all options serve the set well.

One processing mode best defeated is IFC (Intelligent Frame Creation), which adds high-frame rate smoothness to the image, along with incrementally unwanted motion artefacts. This 3,000Hz FFD (Focused Field Drive) panel is natively fast enough to retain Full HD clarity with movements (measured at 6.5 pixels per frame), so IFC is of little practical use. Last year's fastest NeoPlasma was rated

'Panasonic's ZT65 60in plasma delivers – unquestionably – the best 1080p image in town'

at 2,500Hz FFD, so this is a significant step up. The faster drive means that the light emission period has been shortened; subfields are virtually packed into 1/3000th of a second, compared to last year's 1/2500th of a second. There's no afterglow, which keeps images crisp and smear-free. If you do want additional image stability with horizontal pans, then opt for the Minimum IFC setting.

One of the screen's more astonishing traits is the level of shadow detail held in even the inkiest of black scenes. Here, dark fabrics that can block solid on screens which crush blacks for higher contrast reveal deep, subtle textures without sacrificing overall blackness. This gives images incredible depth. Colour vibrancy is also outstanding. The panel employs a new pure red phosphor and is able to display 98 per cent of the DCI specification.

Top-notch THX

Of the various pro-style presets, I felt THX the best. It has more snap and dynamics than regular Cinema mode with no overscan by default. The set is also the first I've seen to feature an EBU default mode. This complies with the Tech 3321 directive drafted in 2007 by the European Broadcast Union, for consumer displays to 'adequately reflect the creative values intended by the programme director.' It optimises the display for luminance, black level, contrast, gamma, colour and frame-rate, and is an interesting alternative to THX. I suspect many users will actually find the setting too dark, because its heavy gamma burden relies on blacked-out viewing conditions to work well. And even then I'll wager you'll struggle to pull detail from the shadows at normal viewing distances.

Panasonic's 2013 Hexa image processing platform services a multiplicity of modes and presets, including Pro modes which have a REC 709 default colour space. The Custom preset also opens up an entire dungeon of correction, including the ability to alter panel luminance, variable between Low, Mid, High. The Low setting is my preferred option, as the other settings invite sparkling pixel noise in blacks. While this isn't actually visible for the most part from a normal seating position, it could prove distracting. The panel also retains its clarity when viewed slightly off-angle. Changes to the production process have resulted in the elimination of the traditional air gap between the outer-glass and panel itself, which has killed those characteristic plasma reflections.

Until now the last word in plasma picture quality has always been Pioneer's famed Kuro TVs. So is the ZT65 finally able to usurp its throne? To find out, we staged a shoot-out between a 9th-gen 60in Kuro panel and the ZT65, with an HDBaseT system delivering simultaneous Full HD feeds to both. Despite the Pioneer being somewhat elderly, the slugfest between the two screens transpired to be epic. The Kuro has always led the field when it came to gorgeous velvety blacks, effortless shadow detail and vibrant image clarity – all characteristics now shared with the ZT65.

Both panels deliver ebony excellence, with the Panasonic generally producing deeper hues, although these could at times seem oversaturated. The ZT65 also inched ahead when it came to fine detail. The Kuro, however, countered with generally better dynamics: video footage of a black and chrome Harley Davidson had just a bit more metallic zing on the older set. After a plethora of picture quality comparisons this clash of the titans was rated a tie.

The Kuro has no truck with 3D, of course; the ZT65's 3D performance is bright and entertaining. David Attenborough's *Kingdom of Plants* (Sky 3D), proves deeply immersive. Sharp close-ups of Chinese Water Dragons adopt the demeanour of prehistoric dinosaurs on the big Panasonic. While there is some crosstalk evident amongst the fronds, it's not particularly intrusive.

Sonically, the set does a decent job. Stereo imaging is appreciable and the sound not too thin. There is, however, one fairly unfortunate caveat. The fan noise it outputs is omnipresent and has a tone which is often distracting. This noise can be disguised with volume, but during quiet scenes there's nowhere to hide.

Leaving the stage

The TX-P60ZT65 is an engineering triumph. Panasonic has produced a TV capable of breathtaking images with a Smart feature set that's positively exhaustive and an industrial design that's simply beautiful. A fine way to bow out of the plasma game ■

ON THE MENU



→ The Panasonic My Home Screen interface can be used to bring all your sources, both online and networked, together on a single page for easy access. Different versions can be customised to your family's needs

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter (two pairs of glasses supplied)
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freeview HD and 2 x Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; AV adaptor for component/Scart/composite; 3 x USB; optical audio output; Ethernet; SD card slot; CI slot
SOUND: 20W
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,404(w) x 828(h) x 47(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 35.5kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Hexa Processing Engine; 3,000Hz Focused Field Drive; Intelligent Frame Creation; Smart Viera My Home Screen UI; Skype; USB hard drive recording; USB, DLNA and SD card media playback; Swipe & Share 2.0 compatible

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic TX-P60ZT65

→ £3,800 Approx

→ www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

HIGHS: Scintillating picture quality, with deep blacks and superb shadow detail; outstanding fine detail performance; advanced Smart feature set; beautiful glass and metal design

LOWS: Intrusive fan noise; limited availability; not 4K

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The resolution revolution

Sony's 65in TV brings Ultra HD to the masses – well, nearly... **John Archer** explores one of this year's hottest TV tickets



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive (four pairs of glasses included)

ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160

TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD, DVB S2

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; component video; composite video; Ethernet; RF input; 3 x USB; optical digital audio output

SOUND: Magnetic Fluid Speakers with 65W total output

BRIGHTNESS: N/A

CONTRAST RATIO: Over 1 million:1

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,682(w) x 875(h) x 58(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 45kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Native UHD resolution; 4K X-Reality Pro upscaling; Reality Creation processing; Live Colour processing; Triluminos backlight system; DLNA and USB media playback; Sony Entertainment Network; NFC support

THIS 65IN TV is vastly more living room-friendly than the first wave of 84in 4K beasts, and sports a sensational design, combining a premium black finish with elongated wings containing six sizeable speakers. Those speakers supply some robust sonics, handling everything from the huge dynamics of *Saving Private Ryan*'s opening beach assault to the subtle atmospheric of *Se7en* with considerable elan.

Looking at 4K stills is a perfect way to appreciate what all the Sony's extra pixels can do. The resolution of the image is the main thing, but also apparent is how much extra depth the screen's enhanced pixel count delivers, and the way colours are rendered. The greater resolution enables the screen to deliver colour blends of real precision and accuracy, and these join the enhanced depth of field

to make 2D images almost feel 3D.

With Ultra HD demo footage, football clips reveal insane levels of facial detail in the watching crowds, hitherto imperceptible weaves in the players' outfits and individual blades of grass in pitches. Things get even better with scenes from Sony's *Total*

Recall and *After Earth* flicks. Stunning clarity is coupled with fluid motion and a spectacular colourscape courtesy of Sony's Triluminos tech.

Upscaling sources to UHD resolution proves another area of strength. HD sources remapped to the 3,840 x 2,160 screen appear dense, detailed and mostly free of noise and processing foibles. They're no rival for a native 4K experience, but Sony's silicon is very adept, particularly when dealing with BDs that have been created from 4K digital masters. Even SD looks credible on the 65X9005A. Not especially detailed, perhaps, but far from the over-processed, noisy mess I'd expected.

Recent research suggests that Joe Public is losing interest in 3D. A shame, as it astounds on the 65X9005A. The screen delivers the advantages of the passive 3D format – no flicker, enhanced brightness and colours, no crosstalk – at a resolution that, while still halved vertically, is greater than Full HD. The result is brilliantly immersive pictures.

Unfortunately, the 65X9005A's black level performance isn't best-in-breed. If you're watching in a darkened room, some black picture areas tend to look slightly grey – or disconcertingly grey if you deactivate the TV's local dimming system. Set the latter to its maximum level to hugely improve black levels, and you have to factor in noticeable banding of light around bright objects. The low local dimming setting delivers the best compromise.

Thanks to this issue, the 65X9005A isn't totally perfect. But it's very close... ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
65in Ultra HD TV

POSITION:
At the top of Sony's 2013 TV roster. Last year's 84in X9005A is still available

PEERS:
Panasonic TX-P60ZT65;
Panasonic TX-L65WT600

HCC VERDICT

Sony KD-65X9005A

→ £6,000 Approx → www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 8466 555

HIGHS: Unbelievable Ultra HD pictures; supreme design and build; effective upscaling; astonishing sound quality

LOWS: Black levels could be a touch better; there are sleeker Smart interfaces around; integrated speakers make set feel big

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

All-round excellence

There's more to Samsung's 8000 Series LED than its glam design and Smart talents. This 55in TV delivers exquisite hi-def images too. **John Archer** reports



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active (two pairs supplied)
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD and Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Ethernet; composite video input; RGB Scart input; RF inputs
SOUND: 40W
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,224.4(w) x 707.2(h) x 34.9(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 16.8kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Micro-Dimming Ultimate system; DLNA multimedia playback; USB multimedia playback and recording; Samsung Smart TV online platform with extensive range of video streaming services; S-Recommendation system; touchpad remote included; 1,000Hz motion processing; gesture and voice control

SAMSUNG'S UE55F8000 HITS the ground running with its design, which combines an on-trend slender bezel with a dark, glassy finish and built-in camera. Add in the extensive feature set (Ethernet and Wi-Fi network options for DLNA file streaming and access to online services courtesy of Samsung's Smart TV platform, bountiful catchup TV options, S Recommendation system, speech and gesture control...) and you've got a screen that's guaranteed to turn heads before you even press play on your BD deck.

In terms of picture tech, this top-of-the-range Full HD TV uses Samsung's latest Ultra Clear Panel design, featuring an improved edge LED lighting system and 'micro-dimming ultimate' processing that breaks the image down into small blocks for processing, so it can, supposedly, accurately judge the optimum settings for the

picture at any given moment. It inevitably offers 3D, too. Being a Samsung TV, this means active rather than passive.

Convincing contrast

Imagery is easily the best Samsung has produced from an LED TV. Particularly striking during a run-through of *The*

Dark Knight is the set's contrast, which finds the UE55F8000 producing a deep and convincing black during the scenes where Batman rescues Gordon's family from Two-Face. The picture's overall brightness is reduced to get to these rich black hues, meaning images don't have quite as much dynamism as those of Sony's 55W905A. However, they still look wonderfully punchy and never suffer with the light blocking that affects other LED models. And the backlight clouding issues that have affected previous Samsung LED generations appear to have been conquered.

Sharpness and detail are superior. The Venice shootout in *Casino Royale* proves frighteningly real and crisp, aided by terrific motion handling. In fact, the image's sharpness is almost too much until you turn off the TV's edge enhancement option and nudge down the sharpness preset.

Colours are bold and dynamic, and tweaking the TV's settings (Samsung continues to struggle to deliver really useful picture presets) can help improve their subtlety. A high brightness ensures the UE55F8000 produces effective 3D pictures too, as the brightness combats the natural dimming effect of Samsung's lightweight active shutter spex. It's therefore easier to appreciate the Full HD detailing in stereoscopic Blu-rays.

All in all, this is a fine TV from the Korean brand – Smart, stylish and an exceedingly good performer ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
55in Full HD LED TV

POSITION:
Samsung's ultimate Full HD set. The higher-end 9 Series uses 4K panels

PEERS:
Sony KDL-55W905A;
Panasonic TX-L55WT65

HCC VERDICT

Samsung UE55F8000
→ £2,500 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk → Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Terrific and stable 2D and 3D picture quality; sophisticated Smart UI; brilliant design; voice and gesture control will amuse some
LOWS: Unhelpful picture presets; dark scenes lack a little punch versus very best local dimming flatscreens

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Colour like no other

Sony's Triluminos technology ensures its 55in W9 model packs a real picture punch – and even its audio performance impresses **John Archer**



HOME CINEMA
Choice
BEST BUY

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active (four pairs supplied)
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Freeview HD and Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Ethernet; composite video input; RGB Scart input; RF inputs
SOUND: 20W
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,241(w) x 723(h) x 37(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 19.7kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Triluminos LED system; local dimming system; DLNA multimedia playback; USB multimedia playback and recording; SEN online platform with multiple video streaming services; NFC support

AFTER EXPLODING BACK on to the TV scene in 2012 with its stunning HX853 series, Sony wants to make just as much of a splash with that model's successors, as represented here by the 55W905A – and this set certainly advances Sony's cause with its looks. The frame around the 55in screen is gorgeously slender, yet still finds room for a 'Sense of Quartz' – otherwise known as a turquoise highlight cut against the rest of the bezel.

Setup menus sport plenty of picture calibration tools, including white balance and colour management options, plus control over most parts of Sony's processing engine. The local dimming system previously employed to good effect on the HX853 range is on hand here, as is the brand's new-for-2013 Triluminos tech, which applies quantum dot colour filters to edge-mounted LEDs to deliver a more vivid, wider colour palette.

by bright whites and vivid colours. Punchier fare, meanwhile, like *The Muppets* Blu-ray, looks vibrant and richly saturated, clearly benefitting from the Triluminos edge LED system. Actually, the palette can look a bit too aggressive if you use Sony's Live Colour feature on any setting other than its lowest mode. Yet even with Live Colour deactivated, the 55W905A delivers subtle and expressive tones.

Motion handling is assured. *The Dark Knight's* action scenes retain a keen sharpness, and Sony's impressive MotionFlow processing is able to up detail retention without obliterating a film's sense of realism. Video processing is good enough, too, to upscale standard-def sources with excellent clarity.

With 3D the 55W905A continues to excel, mostly. Don any of the four free pairs of active shutter glasses and the impact of the colours in 3D mode is startling. Also, detail levels are high, motion is handled well, and the sense of 3D space is convincing.

One problem with the Sony is the very rare appearance of light 'blocking' around small, bright objects and an unusually narrow viewing angle before the image's contrast takes a hit. But I could live with either of these issues in exchange for the TV's overall picture prowess.

The icing on the cake is the 55W905A's powerful, clean and layered audio performance, which comes courtesy of Sony's long-duct system and angled drivers that disperse their sonics off a lip in the TV's bezel.

Overall, this is a flatscreen that deserves its flagship status ■

Able successor

The 55W905A's pictures are as good as I'd hoped for. Key to its success is an outstanding contrast performance, which sees rich, deep blacks in dark sequences (like Lincoln's nighttime meeting with his team in Steven Spielberg's biopic) accompanied

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
55in Full HD TV with Triluminos tech

POSITION:
Top of Sony's Full HD flatscreen lineup

PEERS:
Samsung UE55F8000;
Panasonic TX-L55WT65;
LG 55LA860W

HCC VERDICT

Sony KDL-55W905A

→ £2,300 Approx → www.sony.co.uk
→ Tel: 0844 8466 555

HIGHS: Superb image and audio quality; good quantities of online video streaming; striking design

LOWS: A little 3D crosstalk; limited viewing angle; only a Full HD panel

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Look on the bright side

Samsung's premium flatscreen reminds **John Archer** why plasma is still the serious home cinema fan's TV tech of choice



LAST YEAR SAMSUNG lost ground to Panasonic with its plasma TVs. So strong is the Korean brand's apparent desire never to be second-best at anything, though, that its engineers have gone into overdrive with the PS64F8500, re-engineering its panel (including a new discharge gas and improved Real Black Filter) until it delivers pictures that are truly remarkable.

The set's design is a bit chunky. The bezel sticks out more than an inch on all four sides, and its heft is emphasised by its deep, metallic grey finish and the unusual elliptical stand the TV squats down on. The overall look certainly isn't unattractive, but it will make substantial impact on your décor. Connections include a quartet of HDMI inputs.

Delving into the onscreen menus reveals an expansive suite of picture tweaks, including calibration-friendly treats such as colour, gamma and white balance control. For many, however, the highlight of the operating system will be Samsung's feature-packed and gorgeous Smart TV engine.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
64in plasma TV
with active 3D

POSITION:
The PS64F8500 sits
right at the top of
Samsung's 2013
plasma TV range

PEERS:
Panasonic
TX-P65VT55;
LG 60PM970T

Picture intensity

Samsung claims
it has increased

brightness (by 250 per cent) and contrast (by 400 per cent) over last year's models, and these two improvements combine to produce pictures of unprecedented intensity, dynamism and vibrancy for a plasma TV. What's more, while I'm used to finding PDPs losing contrast and vibrancy in bright room conditions, the PS64F8500 retains pretty much all of its image quality even with my room lights turned to their highest level. This makes the tech a direct living room rival for LED, rather than it just being a premium home cinema option.

Not that the PS64F8500's 'casual' picture credentials stop it from also being a very good home cinema display. On the contrary, witnessing inky, rich yet nuanced black tones while simultaneously enjoying – in the same frame – bright, vibrant but still subtle and accurate colours never grows old. The combination of darkness, light and colour on show during the key poker sequences in *Casino Royale*, for instance, is remarkable.

The startling brightness pays off handsomely with 3D movies, too. Watching *Prometheus* and *Frankenweenie* using the two pairs of free active shutter glasses, it's great to find a plasma 3D picture not exhibiting the usual enthusiasm-sapping lack of luminance. Motion is well-handled, too; it's only crosstalk noise that dampens the 3D celebrations.

Minor flaws include some greenish dither noise over dark parts of the picture and very poor preset picture modes, but overall this is a brilliant bigscreen TV ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active (two pairs of glasses supplied)

ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD, Freesat HD

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; component video input; composite video input; Ethernet; stereo audio input; digital audio output; stereo audio output; CI slot; PC input; RGB Scart

SOUND: 2 x 10W

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A

CONTRAST (CLAIMED): N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1482.6(w) x 877.8(h) x 55.4(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 32.8kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; multi-screen content management system; Smart TV online service including extensive video service support; USB multimedia playback; DLNA network playback; colour management system; white balance management; gamma management; built-in camera; gesture and voice control options; secondary touchpad remote

HCC VERDICT

Samsung PS64F8500

→ £3,000 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk

→ Tel: 0330 7267864

HIGHS: Jaw-dropping picture quality; unfazed by ambient light; video-rich online service

LOWS: Minor floating blacks; some dithering during dark scenes; occasionally inscrutable onscreen menus; voice and gesture controls too error prone; retro styling...

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Raising the bar high

If you want a soundbar that marries high-quality sonics with state-of-the-art connectivity and a sideline in audio streaming, **Danny Phillips** believes you should audition Monitor Audio's ASB-2

THE VAST MAJORITY of soundbars on the market are of the budget persuasion, marketed as simple, cost-effective upgrades for lacklustre TV speakers. Sometimes you get a soundbar that's cut from a different cloth, taking a more refined approach to design and sound quality. The ASB-2 from Monitor Audio is one of those.

The British brand's first soundbar is also packed with features. AirPlay and DLNA music are onboard, while a wide range of inputs makes it a versatile hub for all your audio kit.

Like the similarly sophisticated but pricier Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, the ASB-2

is blessed with stunning build quality and design. As soon as you pull it from the box its high-end pedigree is clear – the cabinet is heavy and feels supremely solid.

The entire front section is covered by a silky black cloth, broken up by only a light bar that changes colour when you switch source. Behind the cloth are two 5.5in woofers, two 4in midrange drivers and two 1in gold dome tweeters made from Monitor Audio's Ceramic Coated Aluminium Magnesium (C-CAM). Power is rated at a substantial 160W.

A supplied rubber table stand stops the soundbar slipping about, but it can also be

mounted on the wall using an optional bracket. Make sure your D.I.Y. skills are good, though, as the bar weighs in at a hefty 11.5kg.

Rear connections include three HDMI v1.4 inputs and an ARC-compatible output, plus optical, coaxial and analogue stereo inputs, a 3.5mm minijack input, a subwoofer output and a USB port that supports music playback from iOS devices. Compared to the stripped-down behinds of Bose's Cinemate 1SR and Sonos' PlayBar, it's positively overloaded.

Setup is carried out through an onscreen menu – a rarity among soundbars. The basic, blocky text is dated, and you have to press



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Soundbar/audio streamer

POSITION:
Monitor Audio's debut active soundbar

PEERS:
Sony HT-ST7;
Bose Cinemate 1SR
Sonos PlayBar

right instead of OK to select an option, but it gets the job done.

Readying the ASB-2 for AirPlay/DLNA (there's no Bluetooth, unfortunately) is incredibly easy with a WPS router or iOS device – with the latter, simply connect via USB and share its Wi-Fi settings by tapping 'Allow' on the screen. PC setup through a web browser is trickier – my router refused to appear in the list so I gave up and used the peer-to-peer AirPlay Direct connection instead. Format support via AirPlay includes ALAC, MP3, AAC and FLAC.

Worth the money

Some people may question the wisdom of buying a £1,000 soundbar – an amount, incidentally, that could get you a decent receiver/speaker combo – but once you hear its sound quality, and consider the feature set, the price tag starts to make sense.

The ASB-2 is powerful and polished in equal measure, with punchy, authoritative bass, clear, decisive mids and jaw-dropping detail reproduction. In fact, it's the latter that sets the Monitor Audio apart. It digs out the sort of subtle textures that cheaper rivals gloss

over. This gives the sound an irresistible and absorbing silkiness and fluidity.

And in terms of excitement the ASB-2 mixes it with the best sound systems. Play the thrilling, chilling dénouement of *Children of Men* and the soundbar stages the action beautifully. As Theo weaves his way through Bexhill refugee camp in a single take, machine gun fire pops from the speakers with taut, pistonic bursts, while military vehicles rumble menacingly past the camera.

Explosions are big and visceral, and, after a brief ceasefire, the fighting fires up again and the ASB-2 shatters the silence with a fast, sudden dynamic shift. It's an extraordinary performance – insightful and layered but backed up with depth and a terrific sense of scale. Dialogue is clear and realistic, too.

The only drawback is the 3D Audio processing, which claims to add width to the soundstage but doesn't make much difference.

With tracks from iTunes streamed via AirPlay showing the same level of sonic refinement as BDs, it's easy to applaud the ASB-2. Monitor Audio has crafted a fine performer that proves you can cut down on clutter without compromising on quality ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 5.5in C-CAM subwoofers; 2 x 4in C-CAM midrange drivers; 2 x 1in gold dome C-CAM tweeters

AMPLIFICATION: 160W output (ARC compatible); 1 x HDMI digital audio inputs; stereo phono input; 3.5mm analogue input; phono LFE subwoofer output

DOLBY TRUE HD/DTS-HD MA: No/No
SEPARATE SUB: No

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 1,005(w) x 180(h) x 167(d)mm
WEIGHT: 11.52kg

FEATURES: Onscreen GUI; stereo, 5.1 and 7.1 linear PCM support; wall or tabletop mounting; AirPlay, DLNA, UPnP music streaming; 3D Audio mode; 3D passthrough; Class D amplifier with five discrete power amplifier stages



HCC VERDICT



Monitor Audio ASB-2

→ £1,000 Approx → www.monitoraudio.co.uk
→ Tel: 01268 740580

HIGHS: Commanding, detailed sound; supreme build quality; AirPlay and DLNA support; generous connections

LOWS: Expensive; fiddly PC Wi-Fi setup; rudimentary onscreen menu; 3D Audio processing not worth bothering with

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Spreading the love

Philips has revamped the soundbar concept to include multichannel audio by virtue of detachable speakers. An intrigued **Mark Craven** puts it to the test



Remove the end speakers to get a fuss-free 5.1 setup

HOME CINEMA
Choice
BEST BUY

PHILIPS' HTL9100 IS a neat idea. A soundbar/subwoofer combi that incorporates two detachable battery-powered speakers, allowing you to switch from stereo to multichannel just by moving them around your living room, is the kind of forward-thinking product I've come to expect from the brand behind Ambilight and 21:9 ratio TVs. Yet can the HTL9100 deliver a sound performance worthy of its £600 ticket?

Well, it's certainly nice to look at. As part of Philips' well-regarded Fidelio stable of audio products, the HTL9100 arrives flourishing the familiar design cues – if you like things black and silver and with a few curves, then this is the soundbar for you.

The main soundbar unit packs a quartet of drivers (two 2.5in woofers and two 1in tweeters), with two additional 2.5in 'full-range' drivers attaching to each end in their own cabinet. When these are connected, they

charge their Lithium polymer batteries. The maximum two-hour charge should provide around 10 hours of wireless playback.

The easiest way to use the HTL9100 is as a regular soundbar, with the two extra speakers connected to the main unit and providing a beefed-

up stereo soundstage. In this configuration it delivers an admirable, though not perfect, 2.1-channel performance.

With the climactic shootout in 2008's *Rambo* (Blu-ray), the subwoofer showcases the kind of bass prowess that modern TVs just can't provide; the slams of artillery fire are accompanied by deep, thumping throbs that bring visceral energy to the onscreen mayhem. And upping the volume (the 'bar's front LED lights are your only clue here) doesn't make the HTL9100 flinch much either.

A criticism of the HTL900 is that it lacks a little verve and sparkle. Its overall tone leans a bit towards the bottom end, and I couldn't rectify this with the basic bass and treble adjustments. Nor is the soundstage particularly wide.

Coming to life in 5.1

Thankfully, the Philips ups its game when the detachable speakers are used for surround channels. Give it a multichannel source and it automatically switches to 5.1 mode and – bingo – the narrowness of its soundstage melts away and movie material comes to life. My misgivings about battery-powered speakers were dashed once I heard the first bullet zip past my right side and a mortar shell track from the rear of the soundstage to front. Sure, these aren't the most impressive of cabinets in terms of scale or tonality, but they do their job well, and the fact you can place them anywhere is a real boon. This wireless neat trick makes it worth an audition ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 2.5in bass drivers; 2 x 2.5in full-range drivers; 2 x 1in tweeters

AMPLIFICATION: 120W + 90W

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI inputs; HDMI ARC-compatible output; optical digital audio input; coaxial digital audio input; 3.5mm jack; stereo analogue input

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No

SEPARATE SUB: Yes

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 1,013(w) x 156(h) x 73(d)mm

WEIGHT (MAIN UNIT): 4.2kg

DIMENSIONS (SUBWOOFER): 200(w) x 500(h) x 200(d)mm

WEIGHT (SUBWOOFER): 4.8kg

FEATURES: Detachable left/right rear speakers with chargeable Lithium polymer battery; Dolby Digital; Dolby Pro-Logic II; DTS; Virtual Surround mode; Night Mode; Auto Volume; treble/bass adjustment; Bluetooth support; wall-mountable soundbar; automatic Smart Equalization detects orientation; SMSC 5.8GHz wireless technology to rear speakers

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Soundbar/subwoofer duo with 5.1 mode

POSITION: Philips' best-in-breed soundbar

PEERS: Sonos PlayBar; Yamaha YSP-2200; Bose Cinemate ISR

HCC VERDICT

Philips Fidelio HTL9100

→ £600 Approx → www.philips.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 338 04 89

HIGHS: Neat styling and design; innovative 5.1 mode; wireless subwoofer connection; weighty, detailed performance

LOWS: You need to keep charging the surround speakers; tiny LED status lights; somewhat narrow stereo sound

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Return of the wideboy

Bowers & Wilkins' debut Panorama was certainly impressive, but lacked vital connectivity. This HDMI-equipped second-gen model aims to win over **Danny Phillips**



IN 2009, BOWERS & Wilkins launched the Panorama – an expensive soundbar that delivered stunning sound quality but lacked crucial HDMI connections. Now B&W has unleashed the Panorama 2, which, like any good sequel, aims to go bigger and better. Yet with the majority of soundbar sales falling within the £100–£300 price bracket, is there still an appetite for a mega-bucks premium soundbar? B&W certainly hopes so.

Your £1,650 gets you a sumptuously made product, hewn from the finest materials and blessed with stunning looks. The enclosure is bulky but curvy, and styled in mirror black stainless steel that attracts more fingerprints than a CSI crime scene.

One thing you don't get with the Panorama 2 is a separate subwoofer – that's because bass frequencies are handled by two 3.5in woofers inside the soundbar, reducing clutter considerably. There are nine drivers in total, all newly designed. The two woofers join a Nautilus tube-loaded tweeter and two midrange drivers in the all-important centre section, while four separately-housed 3in drivers handle the 'surround' channels.

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Premium HDMI-equipped soundbar

POSITION: Bowers & Wilkins' only soundbar product

PEERS: Bose Cinemate ISR; Libratone Lounge; Sonos PlayBar; Monitor Audio ASB-2

Connectivity is vastly improved over the original. Crucially, this version boasts three HDMI inputs and an ARC-compatible output, bringing it bang up-to-date with today's Blu-ray decks and TVs. Here, then, it

immediately stands out against rival (though less expensive) products: Sonos' PlayBar, Bose's Cinemate ISR and Libratone's Lounge all eschew HDMI hookup. More fool them.

Digital drought

At this price I wanted the Panorama 2 to be an all-singing, all-dancing audio epicentre but that doesn't quite come to pass. There's no USB port for digital music playback, and no Bluetooth, AirPlay or DLNA streaming either. For £1,650, that's not really good enough, particularly for the type of audiophile buyer it's likely to attract. In terms of audio decoding, the unit supports Dolby Digital and DTS but not Dolby TrueHD or DTS-HD Master Audio. Thankfully that's not a big deal given that you can feed LPCM (decoded by your Blu-ray deck) into the HDMI inputs.

Yet the Panorama 2 cements its place as a Rolls Royce of soundbars with a spellbinding performance. It's a remarkably fluent speaker, teasing out the tiniest details and playing string-heavy movie scores with the pomp and finesse of decent floorstanders. That top-drawer treble is what sets this soundbar apart from cheaper rivals.

Its other great talent is its ability to sound like a much bigger system. Its sense of scale is phenomenal given the cabinet size – raucous action scenes are potent and energetic, underpinned by taut bass that floods the room. Crashes and explosions blast from the speakers with controlled force, while dialogue is articulated with depth and clarity. The surround drivers, meanwhile, disperse sound in a way that creates a wide, natural sweet spot without resorting to ineffective virtual surround algorithms. A luxurious listen ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 3.5in woofers; 2 x 3in midrange drivers; 4 x 3in surround drivers; 1 x 1in Nautilus tube-loaded aluminium dome tweeter

AMPLIFICATION: 175W

CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI inputs; 1 x HDMI output (ARC compatible); 1 x 3.5mm analogue/digital combi input; RS-232 service connector; subwoofer output

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: No

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 1,100(w) x 125(h) x 181(d)mm

WEIGHT: 14.1kg

FEATURES: Onscreen GUI; Dolby Digital & DTS decoding; Dolby Pro-Logic II; FlowPort; proximity sensor; wall or tabletop mounting; mirror black stainless steel skin and black steel mesh grille

HCC VERDICT

Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2
→ £1,650 Approx → www.bowers-wilkins.com
→ Tel: 0800 232 1513

HIGHS: Sophisticated, potent sound; jaw-dropping build quality and design; three HDMI inputs

LOWS: No wireless music streaming or USB; expensive; HD audio decoding not built-in; no dedicated subwoofer

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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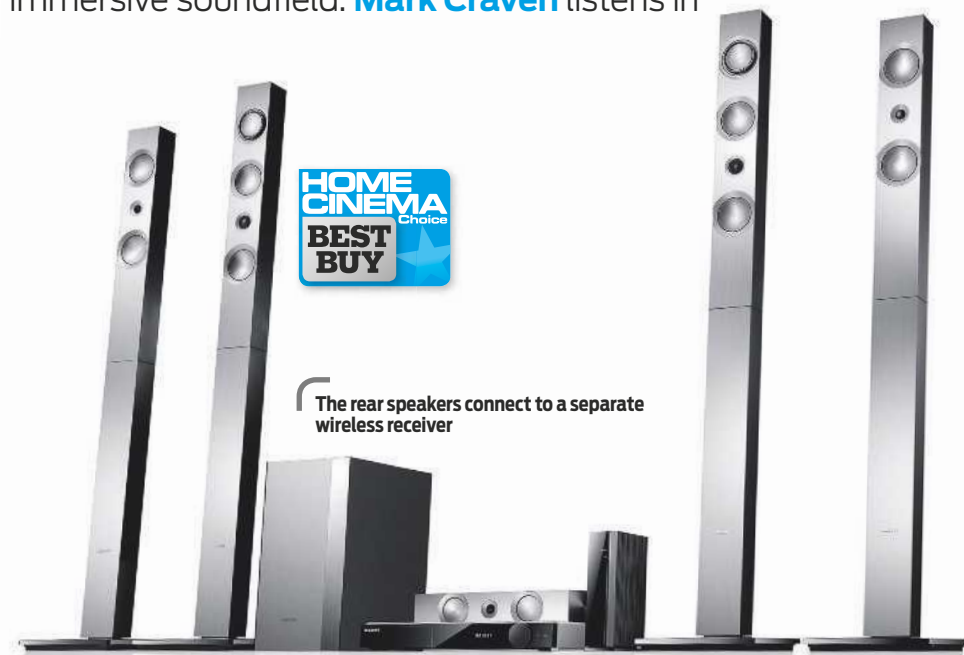
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Expensive but expansive

This all-in-one array boasts exclusive DTS Neo: Fusion post-processing to craft a more immersive soundfield. **Mark Craven** listens in



THE HT-F9750W CLAIMS a couple of key new features over previous Samsung systems, both relating to its internal electronics. Firstly, while it retains the vacuum tube amp technology first introduced to the brand's audio products last year, this is married to a GaN (Gallium Nitride) digital amp, which claims improved efficiency and reduced distortion. Secondly, the HT-F9750W features DTS Neo: Fusion processing, an exclusive collaboration between Samsung and DTS.

Sonic boom

The package sounds rather fabulous for what is essentially a convenience-first system, bringing a warm, enveloping and big sound to your BD collection. In the world of the all-in-one, it's a clear cut above the norm.

It's greatest strength is in the mid and low frequencies – there's a full-bodied nature to its presentation, a benefit from the multiple

drivers, that works well with movie scores. The bluesy soundtrack of *Bullet To The Head* comes across rich and fluid. Even the smaller centre channel, which is out of kilter size-wise with the rest of the array, delivers dialogue with a decent heft.

The subwoofer is no slouch either, offering deep throbs and hard-hitting thumps when required. What's more, it integrates very well with the rest of the Samsung array tonally, although the upper registers of the low-end spectrum feel a bit under-served.

Another great trait of the HT-F9750W is its ability to go loud. During a run-through of Guns n' Roses' *Chinese Democracy* (CD) I let rip on the volume and was left cheered by the result. As the output grew, the sound swelled and the subwoofer became more authoritative. It was a potent display, with only the merest hint of high frequencies becoming splashy. It reflects well on Samsung's new amp technology.

And what of DTS Neo: Fusion? Well, when it's not selected, the top-mounted drivers remain dormant, so stick to this for pure 5.1. Switch it on and they kick into action, lifting the soundfield and adding presence to the front soundstage. However, DTS Neo: Fusion also appears to increase the output of the surround channels, so with a 5.1 mix, what information is actually conveyed is unclear... Regardless, the effect drags the soundstage closer to your listening position, so that you are, essentially, surrounded by sonic delights. Traditionalists might not approve, but for two-channel music it's a hoot.

Samsung's premium home theatre package totes a premium price tag and, in some ways, offers a premium performance. Easy-on-the-ear, with plenty of bottom-end and a nice sense of scale ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To Ultra HD
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI inputs; HDMI (ARC) output; optical digital audio input; analogue stereo input; Ethernet port; USB
SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: No/No
DTS-HD/DOLBY TRUEHD DECODING: Yes/Yes
CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 1,330W
DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 430(w) x 55(h) x 315(d)mm
WEIGHT (MAIN UNIT): 3.3kg
FEATURES: FM tuner; Auto Sound Calibration (via supplied mic); wireless transmission for rear speakers; 7.1 channel amplification; DTS Neo: Fusion; nine sound modes; DLNA media streaming; USB media playback; App portal; built-in Wi-Fi; web browser; GaN and valve amp technology; dual core processor; screen mirroring via AllShare Cast; user EQ; Blu-ray/3D Blu-ray/CD playback

HCC VERDICT

Samsung HT-F9750W

→ £1,500 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk
 → Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Rich, warm, big performance; appealing user interface; packed with additional features; 'wireless' rears; great design

LOWS: Costs more than similarly-specced rivals; DTS Neo: Fusion won't suit everyone; hassle to assemble; auto EQ didn't like my room

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Premium priced tallboy all-in-one system

POSITION:
Samsung's flagship array

PEERS:
LG BH9430PW;
Sony BDV-N7100W

Short but sweet

No tallboy speakers here, but **Danny Phillips** isn't fussed – this Sony set packs plenty of features and provides an assured multichannel performance



SONY'S FEATURE-PACKED 5.1 system eschews the tallboy speakers of its rivals for a less imposing design. The neat, gloss-black satellites stand 455mm tall and can be perched on shelves or furniture.

Inside, the drivers use Magnetic Fluid instead of a damper, allowing the coil to move more freely and, apparently, eliminating interference. It also makes them easier to squeeze into shallow cabinets, which is why Sony also uses it inside its 4K TVs.

Even more arresting is the BDV-N7100's main unit – its angled, forward-sloping Sense of Quartz design smashes the usual black box conventions. The top panel slides open to reveal the disc mechanism, while a blue light and touch-sensitive controls adorn the right-hand side. It's rather gorgeous, and connections are good too, including an HDMI ARC output, two HDMI inputs, optical digital and Ethernet. Rear speakers hook up to a wireless receiver. Other useful features are built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth NFC support, DLNA streaming and SACD compatibility.

Video support includes AVCHD, WMV, XviD and AVI, although some of my hi-def files played out in fuzzy low-resolution. Format support is better via USB, with WAV and MKV added to the list.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Mid-range 5.1
all-in-one system

POSITION:
At the head of a
five-strong stable

PEERS:
Samsung
HT-F9750W;
LG BH9430PW

Internet content comes courtesy of the superb Sony Entertainment Network. Must-have apps like BBC iPlayer, Demand 5, Netflix, LoveFilm and YouTube join quite-nice-to-have apps like BBC News and Sky News, while

vTuner internet radio, Sony's Video/Music Unlimited and social networking clients fill out the vast selection.

While the Sony offers a solid feature count, it really smacks it out of the park where performance is concerned. I started *The Hobbit...* on Blu-ray and ended up watching the film all over again – testament to the system's absorbing, attention-grabbing sound quality.

Entrancing audio

The sonic signature here is one of crispness and composure – every scene sparkles with detail and rich background ambience, which left me entranced by even the most humdrum passages. The sound of chirping birds and trickling water as Bilbo and chums trot through the woods is just beautiful, and Howard Shore's score has rarely sounded silkier.

Skip to a more energetic scene and the Sony takes it in its stride. Its tone has less bite than some rivals, lacking in sheer dynamism and power, but it still packs a punch.

The subwoofer lends deep, weighty bass to the bellowing roars and colliding boulders during the Stone Giants battle – although it could be a touch tighter – while the crack of splitting rocks is cleanly delivered. Effects steering is swift and smooth, dialogue is projected clearly and the wide soundstage is further enhanced by the excellent 3D Surround mode. What's more, you can turn it up loud without too much impact on its balance.

And with Super Audio CD playback showcasing a pleasing musical grasp, it's safe to say the BDV-N7100W is a hugely impressive system for the money. Fully-featured, well-built and great to listen to ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
CONNECTIONS: HDMI output; 2 x HDMI inputs; optical digital input; analogue stereo input; Ethernet port; FM aerial
SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: Yes/No
DTS-HD/DOLBY TRUEHD DECODING: Yes/No
CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 1,000W
DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 480(w) x 79(h) x 212(d)mm
WEIGHT (MAIN UNIT): 3.1kg
FEATURES: 3D Blu-ray/DVD/CD playback; Bluetooth with NFC; All Front Sound; Audio Return Channel; wireless transmission for rear speakers; FM tuner; Auto Sound Calibration (via supplied mic); Football and Berlin Philharmoniker sound modes; DLNA media streaming; USB media playback; Sony Entertainment Network portal; built-in Wi-Fi; web browser; Magnetic Fluid speakers

HCC VERDICT

Sony BDV-N7100W

→ £650 Approx

→ www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 8466 555

HIGHS: Smooth yet dynamic sound; stunning design; lots of features including SACD playback; good internet content

LOWS: Not as aggressive in its delivery as some other systems; no ITV Player or 4OD on offer

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

A subwoofer to RELish

The T-7 uses a Class A/B amp and offers some unusual hookup options. **Ed Selley** is impressed

REL ACOUSTICS HAS been at the business of subwoofers for a very long time and has a slightly different set of design priorities to many other brands. RELs were originally all about giving a bit of low-end shove to your stereo system before 'home cinema' was a gleam in Dolby's eye. To this end, the T-7 is a somewhat different proposition than usual, using a Class A/B amplifier, and offering a distinctive high-level Neutrik Speakon socket as well as regular LFE and speaker-level inputs.

The REL makes use of a downward-firing 8in driver, and a passive radiator instead of a bass port for cabinet tuning. This takes the form of a conventional 10in driver, which is ironically the one that's visible.

The T-7 is small but feels extremely solid and the finish is good. The four feet and top-plate logo are milled aluminium; the exterior makes use of nine coats of hand-sanded lacquer. It looks like a piece of furniture as much as it does audio equipment.



This is a subwoofer with excellent integration at the handover to the speakers, and the overall performance is never anything less than composed, and free of any harshness or lack of control. At the same time, the T-7 manages to conjure aggression and excitement when it's required. This means that the pivotal tsunami sequence in *The Impossible* has both detail and control, and

The T-7 features both passive and active drivers

some of the savagery that you might expect a giant tidal wave to deliver. Part of the reason why REL's £650 woofer is so effective in these instances is the agility that it possesses. There is almost no sense of overhang or bloat to its performance, which greatly aids the sense of realism. This also means that the T-7 is great for music use.

It does trade the last few per cent of depth and slam for greater all-round ability, but owners are sure to enjoy it ■

HCC VERDICT

REL T-7 → £650

Overall ★★★★★

JL AUDIO F110 → Approx £2,300

High-end low-frequency lunatic

The F110 astonishes **Adam Rayner** with its effortless performance

THE JL AUDIO F110 (for 'one driver, 10in') features a 900W amp – this is a brand not scared to use bigger power supplies. Its history is in the car audio world where sound quality competitions demand massive reserves. In fact, its flagship Gotham home cinema sub



may never come to Europe as the amplifier on the back puts out so much RF it'd never get EU CE marking. The Fathom F110 is, however, approved in Europe, despite being as European as a deep suthen' clam chowder.

The price is an eye-opener but do consider the amp power. Then, look at the pro-grade microphone, cracking auto-EQ system, easy operation and high-end build quality. With JL Audio's home cinema gear, you're benefitting from a whole culture of low-end love. And, finally, there's the driver – a heavy-duty polypropylene cone that provides up to four inches of excursion.

For nostalgia's sake I tested this with a track I used with Paradigm's flagship SUB2, called *More Bass, More Boom, More Bottom*, just to hear it glide accurately along to the best audiophile CD ever made, and then revisited *Limitless* on Blu-ray. Performance

was immaculate – while the F110 naturally has a lesser degree of perceived scale and size compared to larger subs, it's like a typical 10in woofer on steroids. The cone goes in and out more. It goes faster. It stops more quickly and with its powerful amplifier can switch from a mere loud rumble to a massive wavefront of bass in the blink of any eye. Moments in *Limitless* are accompanied by deep, rich bass that is intended to evoke disorientation. The F110 literally wobbles the air around you, and reaches so far down it could wake the dead.

Small, cute and pretty, but with terrifying potency, this is American bass at its best ■

HCC VERDICT

JL Audio F110 → £2,300

Overall ★★★★★

A mic is supplied to optimise the F110's output

Sealed with an LFE kiss

Adam Rayner finds SVS offering something a tad more manageable than its towering bass-bins

SVS WAS ONCE famed for making subwoofers only for nerds who could get away with standing a bass tube bigger than their girlfriend in the corner of the room. And, while it does still make those bonkers bassmakers, SVS also offers two other forms of woofer – smaller and more cubical large-performance ported items and a series of compact, sealed woofers. The SB-1000 is from the sealed series and is SVS's idea of as small as any sane person could go, bass-wise.

The sub is just over a cubed foot of neat round-edged box, with a rubbery 12in driver in the front and an amp panel on the back for its DSP-controlled 300W powerhouse. The box is a bit of a function-breeding-form item and, apart from the curved edges, there is little remarkable to see, yet its small size means the sub can easily be tucked away. For setup you get three knobs – level, crossover and a sweepable phase, plus a switch for 12V trigger switching or auto power options.



Rich bass

Performance is revelatory. There is a definite familial sound of rich, girthy bass. Not as pure as a Bowers & Wilkins DB1 or high-end REL, but this is a small, affordable box. It can reach very far down due to the flexible driver suspension and iron grip of its 'Sledge' amp. I spun up some bass-specific music and the

SVS's sub squeezes a 12in driver into its small cabinet

SVS loved it. Not a query, nor waver. It's rated at -3dB to 24Hz – basically, it can *drop*.

On a slightly saner note, *Bridesmaids* on Blu-ray found the SVS equally adept. The music in the track is writ large and the sub easily kept up with my floorstanding speakers. The car crash sequence, followed by a redneck driving off in his V8, really thumped, then rumbled.

Overall, this is ridiculously good for the size and the price. Those seeking high capability from a smallscale cabinet should apply ■

HCC VERDICT

SVS SB-1000 → £500

Overall ★★★★★

QUADRAL QUBE 10 → Approx £525

Bassline believer

Quadral's 10in offering has a musical bent, says **Ed Selley**

THE QUBE 10 is one of three recent arrivals from German loudspeaker marque Quadral. As the name suggests, it makes use of a single downward-firing 10in driver. This is augmented by a single rear port, with a slot design to try and avoid any audible activity from the port while giving the same tuning as a cylindrical one. Amplification comes from a 200W Class D amp, and controls include crossover, phase and switchable voltage.

Like everything else I've ever seen by Quadral, the build is extremely solid and the quality of the lacquered finish is exceptional, with a deep shine and nothing in the way of visible imperfections. The brushed, Quadral-emblazoned steel on the front is also a nice touch and if a subwoofer can ever be called attractive, this is probably it.

Stable boy

The Qube 10 is a slightly deceptive performer in that it never feels as powerful as it actually

is. Much of this stems from how much control it exhibits. The cabinet is completely inert even when driven hard, which means that all you hear, essentially, is the driver.

The Qube 10 doesn't match some rivals for absolute depth and impact but the performance is detailed and fast. Yes, it has impressive extension, but there is a sense that it is a little unwilling to truly let rip when you need it to – it's very hard to provoke it into misbehaving. Detailing is good though – the Quadral can differentiate between very subtle changes in pitch and tone. With music it really excels, as the speed of the driver keeps bass happening at the right moment and complex basslines are well handled.

In all, this is a beautifully built chunk of electronics with a polished all-round performance. Perhaps a little too hi-fi-oriented for some tastes, though... ■



HCC VERDICT

Quadral Qube 10 → £525

Overall ★★★★★

Adding more D to BD

Oppo wants to breathe more life into **Mark Craven's** Blu-rays

DARBEE IS A US firm that manufactures the Darbee, an HDMI-equipped box that sits between your BD player and your display. It's a video processor, only it eschews normal parameters – brightness, contrast, noise reduction, deinterlacing modes or colour balance – and focuses solely on the 'Darbee effect'. This uses real-time analysis of incoming video, and subsequent adjustment, to give images more pop – or 'visual presence', if you will.

The BDP-103D is a well-built universal deck



The BDP-103D is essentially Oppo's excellent BDP-103EU, only with Darbee's processing onboard, and an extra £100 on the asking price. Seeing as the Darbee Darblet retails for around £200, and comes in a downmarket box, it's beginning to look like a bargain. As long as you're interested in what Darbee can do. It certainly works, although you'll need to consider how much you utilise it.

It offers three modes, named Gaming, Hi-Def and Full Pop. With a BD copy of *The Cabin in the Woods* and the Hi-Def effect set to maximum, the shift in image quality was immediately noticeable, though not exactly

pleasant. At this level, detail levels appeared too sharp, with an overly contrasted feeling and exaggerated noise. Dial it down to around 50/60%, though, and Darbee Visual Presence shows its benefits, with a subtle improvement in the picture's sense of depth, while character's faces and background details have a little more definition. This is 1080p material and some will prefer to leave it unfettered; SD sources are perhaps a better fit for the software. Switching to *Dirty Harry* on DVD, Clint Eastwood's loose-cannon cop strode around San Francisco with more, well, presence, seemingly lifted out of backgrounds ■

HCC VERDICT

Oppo BDP-103D → £600

Overall ★★★★★

SAMSUNG BD-F7500 → Approx £250

Deck of delights

The BD-F7500 mixes old-school inputs and cutting-edge features. **Adrian Justins** rejoices

THE BD-F7500 IS Samsung's flagship Blu-ray deck, featuring several enthusiast-friendly features including dual core processing, wireless networking, multimedia file streaming, dual HDMI sockets, and, ahem, 4K upscaling. Audiophiles and owners of some legacy AVRs will be drawn to its 7.1 multichannel analogue audio outputs, whilst the secondary HDMI output could be used for feeding hi-res digital audio to an amp which can't handle 4K or 3D video signals.

Anyone hoping to drive two displays, however, will be disappointed to discover that only one HDMI socket is capable of outputting video signals. Still, at least that sole socket is able to deliver an array of Smart TV services, the likes of which are rarely matched on other higher-end Blu-ray decks. Further features include screen mirroring, web browsing, Wi-Fi direct and, of course, 3D playback.

All in all, a decent feature set for a mid-range price of just £250, although the design,



Packed with features – but no SACD or DVD-A support

build quality and remote control could be improved; the deck feels lightweight and the remote control is small, chunky and crowded.

Disc loading is speedy and smooth compared with the pot-holed Essex B road experience of Samsung's entry-level BD-F6500. And in terms of performance it's a case of fun, fun, fun on the Autobahn. Movies look lustrous and detailed as the deck serves up supremely well resolved BD images; there's excellent clarity in the facial features of the scientists, and ornate background carvings of the gloomy caves, in *Prometheus*. Things are just as impressive with 3D, and the audio

prowess really satisfies, too, especially when using the multichannel analogue outputs.

A multi-media marvel that delivers top-notch AV, the BD-F7500 is easily recommended – although at this price, you might want SACD playback ■

HCC VERDICT

Samsung BD-F7500 → £250

Overall ★★★★★

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Free Time's all-white

Grant Rennell enjoys Humax's revamped Freesat PVR with built-in Wi-Fi

ESSENTIALLY FREESAT'S

ANSWER to YouView, the Free Time platform combines a backwards/forwards EPG with web-delivered catch-up TV and video on-demand.

It was originally confined to just the one Humax-made Freesat+ PVR, the HDR-1000S, now joined by this flashier sibling with its Apple-esque white finish. It houses twin tuners and a 1TB hard disk able to store around 600 hours of standard- or 250 hours of high-definition recordings. A notable improvement on the 1000S is built-in Wi-Fi, allowing you to keep the box uncluttered by network cables or wireless dongles.

The Free Time user interface employs flashy graphics, thumbnail images, channel logos and short help videos. Together, these give the impression you're using a distinct service rather than just another Freesat PVR. There are

numerous ways of finding content. Firstly, the EPG displays now-and-next data, or what's coming up in the next seven days, in a timeline grid. Clicking on 'Earlier' reveals a list of shows available on catch-up for the selected channel from up to seven days previously. Then there's the 'Showcase' menu, which features highlights of what's on catch-up or live TV and can be used to set recordings. You can also search for programmes by title.

There's some multimedia functionality on offer. A variety of popular formats, including MKV and AVI, can be played from USB or



The HDR-1010S sports a nifty ice-white finish

networked drives or copied to the internal hard disk drive. Picture performance is again on the money. The Humax effectively upscales SD broadcasts via HDMI.

Native HD broadcasts also look pleasingly sharp. Streaming SD and HD catch-up TV and YouTube clips through my Virgin Media Super Hub located in the same room proved as smooth as could be expected ■

HCC VERDICT

Humax HDR-1010S → £300

Overall ★★★★★

SKY+HD 2TB → FROM £149 (PLUS SUBS/INSTALLATION)

Sky pushes the limits

HD hoarder Mark Craven welcomes the increased capacity of Sky's 2TB PVR

SKY'S REVAMPED HD receiver/PVR is without doubt an essential purchase for those on the satcaster's more comprehensive packages – anyone, for instance, subscribing to its full bouquet of movie channels will surely appreciate its enlarged hard drive.

Named the 2TB PVR (and replacing the old 1.5TB box), it actually only offers 1.5TB of user-recordable space. The left over 500GB (as was the case with the previous unit), is used for on-demand. This naming system could mislead buyers somewhat, but all you really need to know is that it can now store a claimed 350 hours of HD material, or a whopping 1,180 hours of standard-def telly.

Sky's pricing offers seem to change quite frequently. At

the time of writing, the 2TB unit was available to new customers for £149 (plus subs/install fees). Check the Sky website for full info.

Familiar feeling

In terms of design, the Sky 2TB box is identical to its forebear, with a curved front fascia and iconic remote control. It retains the whisper-quiet operation and well-judged EPG (now with a raft of embellishments, including catchup TV, the ability to undelete recordings and a content-rich on-demand hub). 5.1

output over HDMI has been enabled, and built-in Wi-Fi added.

One niggle does remain, though – Sky's top-flight PVR only provides dual tuners. The latter is where Sky, I feel, should have evolved. The flexibility afforded by the class-leading HDD is superb (I've been grabbing HD movies with abandon), but this more gung-ho attitude to recording is resulting in frequent warning messages, telling me I can't watch the channel I'm on because both the tuners are now required elsewhere. The three-tuner offering from Virgin Media is more liberating in that regard.

Still, there's no escaping the brilliance of Sky's newest PVR – upgrade if you can ■

An essential upgrade for HD hoarders



HCC VERDICT

Sky 2TB → From £149 (plus subs/installation)

Overall ★★★★★

Finally—The cure for Weak Wi-Fi Syndrome!

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Comfort for your ears

Ed Selley discovers some stylish cans with likeable sonic traits

AKG HAILS FROM Austria and its extensive range of headphones covers both the domestic and professional categories. The K550s are relatively inexpensive by the standards of some of the models in the brand's stable, and are a classic closed-back home set, which guarantees minimal noise

leakage in use. These are a big pair of cans, but the very minimalist design and high-quality materials used in the construction means that they look and feel extremely smart. They aren't especially light at 305g, but the weight is well distributed and they prove very comfortable to wear for long periods.

For a closed-back design the AKGs manage to sound impressively spacious and open. The train-related mayhem of *Unstoppable* (Blu-ray) is presented with an expansive soundstage that means that the frequent bouts of locomotive action are given the sense of scale they need to be

AKG's model is comfortable to wear over long periods



convincing. The effect is slightly undermined by the headphones' bass response, though – the bass that is there is detailed and extremely agile but when things start exploding, it doesn't have the depth of some of the competition at this price.

Where the K550s are much more assured is with dialogue, which is clear, natural and convincing. With the more chat-driven *J. Edgar*, this £200 offering shows real assurance and class. Everything on screen is easy to follow, and the 'phones manage to find small details that add a sense of realism to the period drama. Music is also something that's handled deftly, with the same clean and spacious midrange giving tracks solid appeal. Once again, the slightly restrained bass response means that these can lack the energy of some rivals, but for refined late-night listening, this is a very impressive pair of headphones that does a great many things very well.

HCC VERDICT

AKG K550 → £200

Overall ★★★★★

PSB M4U1 → Approx £220

Red devil hybrids

This all-rounder gets an awful lot right, says Ed Selley

PSB IS BETTER known as a manufacturer of hi-fi loudspeakers but launched the noise-cancelling M4U2s to positive acclaim last year. The M4U1s are the same basic design, yet without the noise-cancelling trickery, so come in at a lower price. This is another hybrid design that's aimed at both home and travel use and is supplied with a pair of cords. The PSBs also fold up and can be stored in a zipup case. The red finish I reviewed is a bit sudden, but they are also available in black. Build quality is good, as is comfort.

While another closed-back design, the PSBs manage to sound impressively big and spacious with movie material.

The soundstage gives both action and dialogue enough room to appear convincing. Bass response is also pretty substantial, which gives hi-octane sequences some useful bite and attack. If I'm being

very critical, effect panning from ear to ear doesn't convince as much as I was expecting, but the excellent detail retrieval and genuinely impressive dialogue more than make up for this. The experience of using the PSBs for Blu-rays is convincing enough to forget that you are listening to a pair of headphones – which is surely the point of the exercise.

Tuneful delivery

If anything, the performance with music is even more impressive. The M4U1s have fantastic timing and agility, and the PSB headphones offer deep, foot-tapping bass. The final ribbon to an already solid bow is that these headphones can offer all of this exceptional performance on the move thanks to their sleek form factor.

This might only be the second pair of headphones PSB has ever made, but they seem to have quite a knack for it...



Don't like the red finish? Don't panic – you can also get the M4U1s in black

HCC VERDICT

PSB M4U1 → £220

Overall ★★★★★

The sale of the century

With this cheapo streamer you can update any screen to 'net TV services. **Steve May** is happy

IF YOU'VE BEEN looking for a cost-effective way of adding internet TV, be it catch-up or video-on-demand, to a non-connected telly, then Sky's new £10 Now TV box must seem heaven sent. With its double-take price and promise of instant connectivity, even certified technophobes will be hard pushed to think of reasons not to buy one.

The Now TV box, available from the Now TV website, is a well-made puck of a player, measuring just 84mm x 84mm x 24mm. It features Now TV branding on top and sports a 720p HDMI output, plus a minijack AV output for SD screens. The player has onboard Wi-Fi; there's no Ethernet port. It's actually a clone of the highly regarded Roku LT streamer, which sells for around £50, although it's bundled with the better Roku XS remote control.

You'll need to get a Now TV account to complete the setup process. When you sign



up, you get a 30-day free trial for Sky Movies, which then shifts to £8.99 a month for three months, before settling at £15. The movie selection is the same as that offered on Sky's satellite service. You can also buy Sky Sports day passes for £9.99.

Now TV dominates the home page display, but it's flanked by BBC iPlayer (HD), Demand 5 and news from Sky and the BBC. The box also offers access to the Roku Channel Store, which

is where you'll find a variety of additional services.

Image quality from the service is very good. Sky doesn't promote the package as HD, but uses adaptive bitrate streaming which adjusts depending on the quality of the broadband available. On a fast broadband connection the Now TV box ensured a good deal of the detail and sparkle of *Avengers*

Assemble made it though to the screen. Audio across the board is two-channel stereo, however. Not that I'm complaining.

HCC VERDICT

Now TV box → £10

Overall ★★★★★

PHILIPS HUE STARTER PACK → Approx £180

And Philips said, 'Let there be light!'

Mark Craven makes his own low-cost Smart lighting system

PHILIPS KNOWS A thing or two about lighting, with its Ambilight technology adding a USP to its TV range. With Hue, it's giving you the opportunity to experiment with intelligent illumination without it coming attached to an LED TV.

The product is simple: Wi-Fi-enabled LED light bulbs that can be controlled via an app from a smartphone or tablet. The Starter Pack provides three bulbs, plus a Wi-Fi bridge that plugs into your router. Each bulb is of the Edison Screw variety (if you want to use one in a bayonet-fitted lamp you'll need to get an adaptor) and claimed to last 10 years.

Party time

Once screwed in and connected to your Wi-Fi network, the fun can begin. Each bulb in your Hue setup (you can add more for around £50 each, and a Hue network can support 50) can emit whatever colour you like, selectable from a colour wheel on your phone or tablet. Or you can choose one of a number of quirky presets, or 'drag' a shade

from one of your own photos. Want to bathe in a garish glow of purple and brown? You got it.

Hue has other tricks (such as the ability to set it to a timer) but for me its biggest appeal is as a no-fuss, low-cost 'smart' lighting array for your room – establishing your own scenes for movie-watching or an intermission is straightforward. The app works better on a tablet than a smallscreen phone, of course, and a 10-bulb network would be expensive, but this is a neat product. The box bears the logo 'I Want Hue'. I know the feeling, especially as the company has added LED strips, and dedicated lamps, to the lineup ■



HCC VERDICT

Philips Hue Starter Pack → £180

Overall ★★★★★

The rock'n'roll recorder

Pure's PVR debutant is glossier than a glazed doughnut, says **Steve May**

CAN PURE SHAKE up the Freeview HD digital TV recorder business in the same way it rocked the sedate world of digital radios? On the evidence of this highly-polished punt, it's in with a good shout. The Avalon 300R Connect offers a surprisingly fresh user experience, combining copious connectivity with forward-thinking functionality.

The 1TB PVR itself is slim, standing a mere 44mm tall. There's no on-body display, just a honking big Pure logo flanked by a power button and a USB port, hidden behind a cap. The rear offers an Ethernet connection and

secondary USB, plus analogue stereo phono, optical digital and coaxial digital audio outputs plus RF aerial loop-through. Strikingly, it also features an integrated four-input HDMI switch. Wi-Fi is also onboard – the Avalon 300R Connect is DLNA compliant and played ball with a wide variety of codecs.

The Avalon's most obvious selling point is its HD user interface. It's an honest to goodness head-turner. Settings, recordings, on-demand and HDMI input selection are all accessed via 3D tiles that animate as you browse. The PVR also integrates with Pure Connect, the brand's audio entertainment and subscription platform. Grab an account and you can log in for access to internet radio

services, podcasts and the brand's Pure Music subscription and download services. BBC iPlayer and YouTube clients are also available.

General usability is high. Once in the library you can edit your recordings, trimming excess fluff from the start or finish. Recorded picture quality is excellent. HD looks extremely sharp, with fine detail and texture aplenty. The 300R upscales SD content to 1080p, and doesn't seemingly impart any artefacts of its own. The Avalon also outputs 5.1 over HDMI (when the broadcaster provides it), making it absolutely appropriate for home theatre usage.

All in all, a great, modern, PVR ■

Around the back, Pure's PVR offers four-input HDMI switching – handy for streamlining your setup



HCC VERDICT

Pure Avalon 300R 1TB → £350

Overall ★★★★★

MANHATTAN PLAZA HD-S2 → Approx £50

Frugal Freesat HD finds friends

This budget HD receiver can't be faulted for the price, concedes **Steve May**



AT JUST £50, the Manhattan Plaza HD-S2 is the cheapest HD Freesat receiver you can buy. For those looking to turn away from Sky it'll put your dish to good use, delivering a wide portfolio of free-to-air channels, including HD services from the BBC, ITV, C4, NHK and RT.

The single-tuner box itself is small, at just 210mm wide, and sports an LNB input, HDMI, Ethernet, USB (for software updates), optical digital audio output (for stereo or Dolby Digital 5.1) and legacy Scart.

Setup is a snap. Screw on your F-connector and follow the prompts. The process takes a few minutes. Like all Freesat STBs, you'll need to enter your postcode so that the box can deliver the correct regional channel variations. The menu interface is crisp and unfussy.

The Plaza HD-S2 delivers the classic Freesat platform, rather than the newer Free Time service. Hit Guide and you get the standard full-screen channel genre categories. Curiously, Freesat doesn't provide a sub-

The most affordable Freesat HD receiver around

section for its HD offers, and the channel guide doesn't encourage you to view HD versions of programmes when available. The only way to avoid having to slog through the 8-day EPG for hi-def is to assign HD channels as Favourites.

Picture quality is excellent. 1080i images are crisp and artefact free. Once your box is online, you can access both BBC iPlayer and ITV Player, too. Overall, this cheapo receiver is a great way of watching satellite telly without subscription. Not exactly glamorous, though ■

HCC VERDICT

Manhattan Plaza HD-S2 → £50

Overall ★★★★★

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A hybrid audio solution

Q Acoustics' active stereo speaker pair is an alternative to a soundbar. **Adrian Justins** reports

ACTIVE BOOKSHELF LOUDSPEAKERS

are an unorthodox alternative to a soundbar. But, assuming you have room for them on or near your TV, there is an obvious advantage in that no compromise has been made to size or shape. And while the Q-BT3s look more retro than Gene Hunt sipping a Babycham, their innards are distinctly cutting-edge, with a 50W per-channel power amplifier (in the right speaker), aptX-compatible Bluetooth and a low-distortion DAC. Wired connections run to optical audio, stereo phono and 3.5mm analogue stereo line-level inputs, plus a sub output. Each speaker has a 1in tweeter and 4in midrange/bass unit.

Substantial improvement

TV viewing is substantially improved when using the optical hookup. With ITV's cycling coverage I could comfortably hear the commentary whilst identifying the switch from

helicopters to motorbikes, with the sound of spectators' cheering coming through. Delivery is smoother than Bradley Wiggins' time trialling action. Muttered dialogue in dramas such as *Veep* benefits hugely from the extra clarity

whilst Blu-ray and DVD playback is punchy and dynamic. *The Incredibles* soundtrack is deftly handled with the subtle details of Bob Parr's office activity contrasting with the high-pitched buzzing of the machines chasing Dash through the jungle. And musically, these speakers deliver too – Lady Ga Ga's mezzo-soprano tones of *You and I* effortlessly filled my room, showcasing a nicely full-range and fulsome sound.

The Q-BT3 does what its makers intend, being both a neat sonic upgrade for a TV and doubling up brilliantly for stereo music. Bit pricey, though ■



HCC VERDICT

Q Acoustics Q-BT3 → £400

Overall ★★★★★

DEVOLO DLAN 500AV WIRELESS+ → Approx £130

Neat networking

Steve May solves his streaming problems

COMBINING POWERLINE ETHERNET

distribution with integrated Wi-Fi, Devolo's dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ kit is aimed at those looking to connect both wired and Wi-Fi enabled hardware. This Starter kit comprises two units; the main transmitter which features a single RJ45 input, and a receiver which integrates three RJ45 switches. Combined, it's probably all you need to get an entire AV system online. Additional extenders are available for £90. As both plugs have an integrated electrical socket, you don't even lose a power point when installing the system.

In addition to its triple LAN output, the dLAN 500 is a dual-band 2.4/5GHz Wi-Fi access point, providing a wireless boost when the signal from your router may be flagging.

The system is rated at 500Mbps up to a distance of 300m. In Wi-Fi operation, it supports a theoretical maximum of 300Mbps. In practice both rates are certain to be far lower, but for HD streaming and multiroom

Handily, each plug features its own electrical socket

audio I found the combo to be entirely suitable.

Physically these plugs are roughly twice the size of regular HomePlug rivals, but are well built with internal noise filtering to stabilise bandwidth and encryption options for greater security. Software is supplied to monitor the performance of the system, and there's also a dedicated LAN cockpit app for iOS and Android. This also allows you to switch Wi-Fi functionality on or off.

Performance is excellent. The system streamed HD files across our network and provided internet access to a BD player, Smart TV and laptop without missing a beat. The Wi-Fi signal from the HomePlug has its own



SSID and password, which proved useful and presented no problems. Overall, this is a versatile and powerful networking solution that's easily recommended.

HCC VERDICT

Devolo dLAN 500AV wireless+ → £130

Overall ★★★★★



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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology?
Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

Monster mistake

Hi. I have just bought the 3D/2D UK Blu-ray edition of *Monsters University*. All I can say is thankfully mine was faulty, as the audio drops out every minute or so for about three seconds, all through the film.

I am returning my copy to Zavvi and ordering the four-disc edition from the US. Why, once again, is it us poor UK buyers that are not considered worthy to have the same releases as our cousins overseas? Is my money not good enough?

The US disc is heavy with extras, but all we get is the short film that accompanied *Monsters University* in the cinema and an audio commentary. Usually Disney/Pixar are very good with

their releases, but not this time. Shame on you!
Paul, Plymouth

Anton van Beek replies: I've dealt with the missing extras in the review in this issue (see p146) and agree that this UK release for the Disney/Pixar hit seems remarkably underwhelming.

Your problem with the audio I find particularly interesting, as I also suffered dropouts on the Dolby TrueHD 7.1 track when using my usual multiregion Pioneer Blu-ray player, but it worked fine on my LG player when hooked into the same Onkyo AVR. This has happened with a few other Dolby TrueHD mixes in the past, too. You've told us you're also using an

*Monsters University: no
Collector's Edition in the UK*



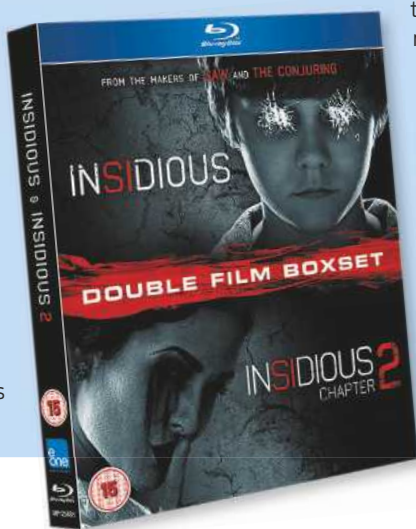
★ STAR LETTER...

I don't need AirPlay – so why should I pay for it?

I've been a home cinema enthusiast since the early 1990s, when my Kenwood Dolby Surround receiver and Panasonic Nicam Stereo VCR were considered hi-tech. Being married with kids and on a middle-bracket income, I have slowly moved up the ladder whenever finances allow and I now find myself the proud owner of some pretty decent kit.

I bought my current amp, a Harman Kardon AVR255, second-hand around two years ago and it has handled my multichannel hunger with great ability. But my setup has outgrown three HDMI connections and so I decided to go for something current and with a lot more features. And this is where I begin my gripe.

Every review I have read makes having AirPlay capability a major plus when it comes to 'scoring' an amp. Any amps which do not have AirPlay leave the reviewer bemoaning this exclusion and, no doubt, deducting points from the overall total.



Okay, I understand that owners of iPods, iPhones and iPads love to be able to wirelessly connect their shiny toys to their AVRs. But believe it or not, there is a growing number of AV enthusiasts who either have never had, or no longer have, Apple devices and therefore the AirPlay feature is not required. I have an Android phone and a BlackBerry PlayBook tablet. Both are more than capable of streaming to a Wi-Fi- or Bluetooth-enabled amp, but even though I have these perfectly good streaming devices I don't intend ever using them for streaming audio. I have a perfectly good HTPC and NAS for all my streaming tasks, leaving me free to do other things with my phone and tablet.

I don't need, and will never need, AirPlay functionality from my amp so why should I be paying for it? By all means, manufacturers should feel free to go ahead and make an optional AirPlay add-on device for their amps, thus giving those who want AirPlay the option of paying for it and those who don't a more affordable product.

In the end I went ahead and bought an Onkyo TX-NR626 receiver. It has Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and Ethernet on board, but no AirPlay. Just the way I wanted it.
Michael McGreevy, via email

Mark Craven replies: Thanks for the letter, Michael. As you are right to point out, the Android platform is outselling Apple, and thankfully we're starting to see AVR manufacturers take

Onkyo receiver, and an imported Oppo deck (which I assume is also multiregion). This would suggest the fault lies somewhere in your electronics, and not actually the disc.

Waiting for 4K content

4K content is essential! (Richard Stevenson's *Point of View*, HCC 228). Upscaled 4K, no matter what, will still look like 1080p Superbit. So in terms of buying a 4K TV, it's reasonable to wait not just until content arrives, but when it becomes affordable – unless, of course, money is not a problem. 4K television is way too early to speak of, as SD television broadcast is still standard. It requires good bandwidth – until then I will enjoy my Panasonic plasma, JVC 4K e-shift projector and big collection of Blu-rays. Romualds Pizans, via email

Mark Craven replies: Yes, genuine 4K content would be fantastic if it hurried up and arrived with a nice cheap price tag. But there's still an argument for consumers to buy a 4K TV and enjoy the better pictures of upscaled Full HD material. This is effectively what you are doing with your JVC projector after all!

this onboard with Bluetooth provision. However, there's no getting away from the fact that many people own Apple devices, and companies want to cater to them, too. In terms of scoring an amp based on whether or not it offers AirPlay – that's not something we do. We'll moan about it, but nothing more. For instance, Sony's STR-DA5800ES costs £2,200 and is AirPlay-ignorant and we had no qualms awarding it five stars.

Star letter-writer Michael wins a copy of the *Insidious & Insidious Chapter 2* Blu-ray twin pack, courtesy of our pals at EntertainmentOne. This double-dip horror is released on Blu-ray on January 6, priced at £24.99 approx.

Where did flicker go?

Whilst visiting an Art Museum in Aarau Switzerland, one of the exhibit rooms had a 1970s-themed display of art and video. Interestingly they were using cathode-ray tube TVs of the period showing video of the time. What to me was more interesting was that both my wife and I noticed flicker on these CRTs and I wondered if it was because we had become so used to flatscreen TVs that have a higher refresh rate and do not put the picture on the screen in the same way. Is it that our brains no longer automatically eliminate the flicker? Americans always use to complain that whereas the content of our TV was superior the picture flickered, due to the fact the frequency on their sets was 60 cycles as against 50 cycles for our PAL sets. David Welford, via email

Martin Pipe replies: Flicker with video on CRT displays can be attributed to the relatively low picture-repetition frequency – 50Hz in the UK and Europe, and 60Hz in the US and Japan (the frequencies of the AC mains supplies). Such refresh rates are on the fringes of our persistence of vision; some people are more sensitive to this unwanted effect than others, although most can tell the difference between 50Hz and 60Hz video (rates still used today) if they're viewed on a completely analogue CRT monitor. If you're used to viewing flicker-free LCD and plasma TVs then, as you suggest, the flicker of an old CRT set may be more noticeable. The faster the sequence of frames, the less obvious the flicker and the smoother the motion – regardless of the display technology employed. Such flicker is exacerbated by the fact >

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that with most broadcast systems – including standard-def 576i/480i and 1080i HD – each complete video frame is built up of two interlaced fields, each of which has half the frame's vertical resolution/number of lines and is sent in half the time. This interlacing technique effectively doubled the refresh rate from the 25Hz or 30Hz frequencies that were originally considered nearly a century ago for television (these would have yielded unacceptable flicker) without increasing the amount of precious bandwidth required. Computers pointed the way forward. Although they've mostly been replaced by more convenient flatpanel displays, CRT PC monitors combining progressive scanning with high refresh rates (e.g., 75Hz) did not visibly flicker. All modern TVs and PJs (and for that matter the last generations of high-end CRT TVs) deinterlace the video if necessary, and multiply the picture-repetition rate using



digital processing, so that flicker is no longer a problem.

Multichannel is dying!

I couldn't agree more with Tony Barret (*Feedback*, HCC 228) about the lack of multichannel inputs on modern AV receivers. I have a Sony SACD player that offers multichannel outs (but no HDMI) and I'm using it hooked up to an old Denon AVR-2807, which I want to upgrade. The lack of AVRs at an affordable price with phono

inputs is a real pain – and I've even seen high-end models that don't bother with this older input. David Smale, via email

Mark Craven replies: You don't say what you want to upgrade your AVR for, David, but I assume it's for improved HDMI connectivity – a glance at the Denon, which is from 2006, shows it offers only two HDMI inputs and one output, all version 1.1. One solution would be

Denon's 2006-era AVR-2807 offers only two v1.1 HDMI inputs

to keep the Denon solely for use with your SACD player, and buy another affordable AVR that offers all the digital bells 'n' whistles that you need. The Denon probably isn't worth much second-hand these days anyway! Of course, this would make your setup rather more complicated, but you would be getting everything you need ■

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Elysium

Director Neill Blomkamp follows up *District 9* with this explosive sci-fi flick starring Matt Damon. Available on Blu-ray™ and DVD with

UltraViolet™ on December 26

from Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, the BD features hours of bonus materials, including six behind-the-scenes featurettes. We have five Blu-ray copies to dish out.

Question:

Matt Damon starred in...

Answer:

A) Gerry B) Terry C) Kerry

Email your answer with '**Elysium**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



2 Guns

Mark Wahlberg and Denzel Washington head up the all-star cast in this action-packed and laugh-out-loud buddy movie. *2 Guns* is out now on Blu-ray and DVD and

thanks to EntertainmentOne we have five copies of the Blu-ray, loaded with extra features, to give away.

Question:

2 Guns star Denzel Washington won an Academy Award for his role in which movie about the US Civil War?

Answer:

A) Gettysburg B) Glory C) Cold Mountain

Email your answer with '**2 Guns**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



The Conjuring

Out now to own on Blu-ray, DVD and digital download, *The Conjuring* is the latest slice of scary-as-hell horror from director James Wan (*Saw*, *Insidious*). We've magicked up five copies of the Blu-ray to give away to fright-fans.

Question:

Which classic horror flick claims to be based on a true story?

Answer:

A) The Amityville Horror B) The Thing C) Friday the 13th

Email your answer with '**The Conjuring**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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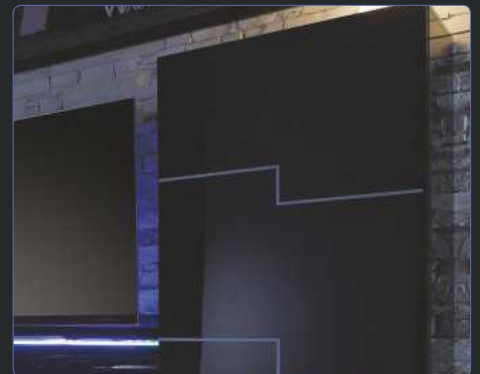
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Mark Craven lives in a world of simplified technology, and is beginning to wonder when AVR manufacturers will get their heads around that idea

AS WE ALL cock one eye towards 2014, I'm keeping one peeper on those products that still act like it's 2004. Yes, I'm talking about AVRs.

It's flabbergasting that even today (only two years away from the flying cars and hoverboards depicted in *Back to the Future Part II*, don't forget) expensive, cutting-edge consumer products can arrive with frustrating, poorly thought-out user interfaces that can have me tearing my hair out. And that's a big problem, not least because I don't have much hair left to grab hold of, and, as someone earning a living in the CE sphere, I ought to be able to rise above it.

Unfortunately not. My AVR and I are locked in a constant battle of wills. I grasp the remote in my sweaty palm, urging the receiver to behave itself, and much of the time it ignores me completely. I can hear it sneering. 'You want that HDMI passthrough feature to work properly? Nah, not interested.'

Such is the complexity of operation that my receiver provides, that it's beginning to cause domestic tension. If I'm away from the house for longer than, say, six hours, before I depart I make sure to re-route my Sky+HD box and Blu-ray player directly into my TV's HDMI inputs. **No one else in the house is confident using my AVR**, and I've grown sick of taking angry phone calls demanding to know why there's no sound accompanying *The Great British Bake Off*.

Trend-setting

The AVR in question is a Pioneer model, but don't take this as a slight against the Kanagawa corp. I've owned Onkyo and Yamaha receivers too, and generally found them equally inscrutable. Similarly, I once took a look at the UI on a budget Sony amp and burst out laughing. It's a trend

amongst receiver manufacturers that needs stamping out. And for inspiration they could look, well, practically anywhere.

Take any modern smartphone, for instance. These are packed full of features, but are so simplistic to operate that I reckon my pet cat could take a stab at making a call. Or a Smart TV – Panasonic's My Home Screen interface is a brilliant example of the kind of visual bigscreen menu system that can make using, and controlling, a slab of electronics easy and, dare I say it, fun. Or Sony's PlayStation. I've watched my four-year-old nephew turn it on, browse the menus, select the LoveFilm client and then scroll through the hi-res artwork of a choice crop of mildly violent cartoons before clicking on the one he wants to watch. On the other hand, ask him to activate the Phase C+ function of my amp and he'd be stumped. He'd probably also want to know what it did, and here I'd be stumped, too.

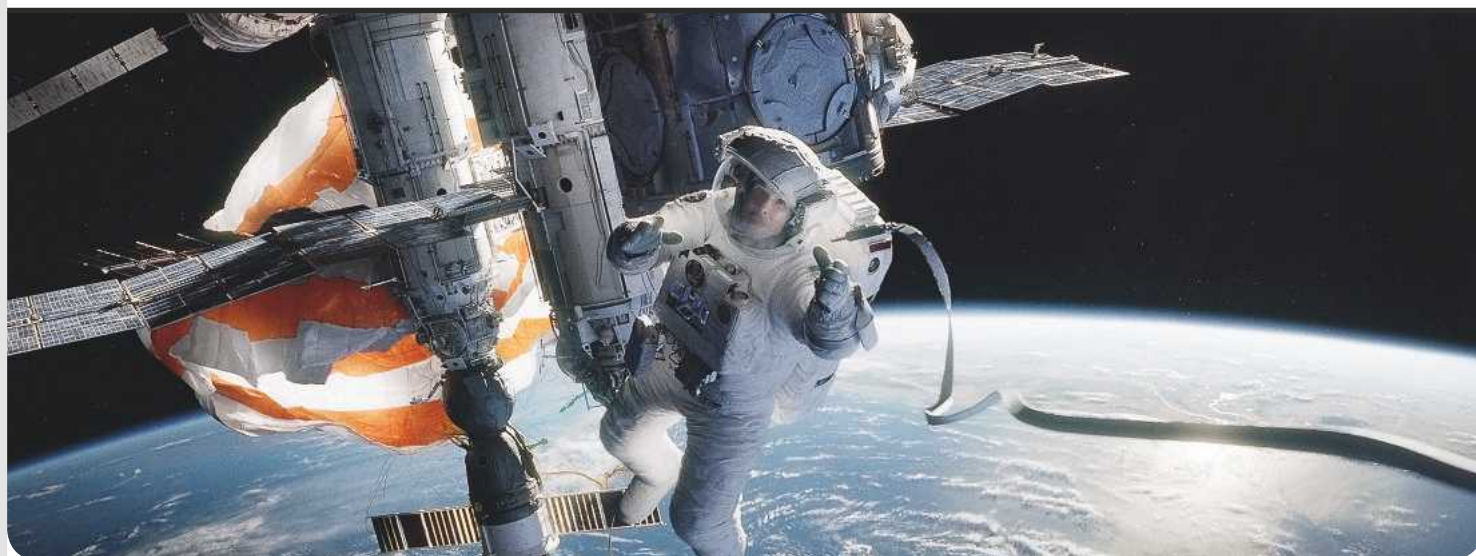
AV receivers are getting better, of course. Audio streaming, slim-line designs, oodles of connectivity, Spotify and Napster clients – all these are welcome additions to the arsenal of a modern power-pusher. Yet at the same time, the faces they present to the world – UIs that are sometimes about as useful as an inflatable pin-cushion – are in need of a refresh.

Some of you may disagree. Once an AVR is wired in and set up, you may find you never feel the need to tweak its settings. Or you may be happy to spend time perusing a 115-page manual, and getting to grips with all the tricks and adjustments on offer. But for full-fat home cinema – not just one-box systems – to really appeal to everyone I'd suggest the receiver brands try to make their products a bit more user-friendly ■

*Are there bits of your system that drive you potty?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Mark Craven is still waiting for the arrival of the hoverboard – not least because it would help him get a drum of speaker wire from the attic





FILM FANATIC

Have reports of the death of domestic 3D been wildly exaggerated? **Anton van Beek** explains why stereoscopy is still a key part of his passion for home cinema...

AT THE END of the year it's traditional for journalists who are struggling to come up with fresh ideas for their op-ed pieces to simply knock together a few hundred words looking back at the last 12 months. For AV tech writers attempting something similar, 2013 will undoubtedly be discussed as the year that 3D died, Ultra HD/4K TVs became a commercial reality, OLED screens went curvy and Panasonic finally read the last rites to plasma.

Whoa... Hold on a minute. 3D is dead? When did that happen? Well, if you believe everything you read, then the death knell for stereoscopic home entertainment first rang out at the 2013 International CES back at the start of the year, with manufacturers no longer shouting boisterously about 3D and focusing their marketing on Ultra HD tech instead.

That doesn't make 3D 'dead', however. It ignores the fact that majority of new TVs are still 3D compliant; the technology is now just another of the many standard-issue features that manufacturers are offering users, rather than something new for them to get really excited about. But what journalist worth their salt is going to let a little thing like that get in the way of cooking up a provocative headline?

A more compelling argument for the failure of domestic 3D came six months later when the BBC revealed that it was pulling out of 3D broadcasting for the foreseeable future: 'I have never seen a very big appetite for 3D television in the UK', Kim Shillinglaw, head of BBC 3D, told the *Radio Times*. Well, what do you expect when (outside of a once-in-a-lifetime UK sporting event) your most heavily-trailed stereoscopic broadcast is the 2012 Queen's Christmas message? Maybe if Her

Majesty had pulled off a triple back-flip before decapitating a malfunctioning robo-butler with her trusty katana and then dodging laser-firing corgis in bullet-time...

For how to do broadcast 3D properly, just look at Sky's dedicated 3D channel, whose audience continues to grow thanks to the mix of movies, sporting events and TV shows that it provides.

Past and future glories

Anyway, if 3D home entertainment is indeed dead, then why do I currently find myself more excited about it than ever before?

Without a 3D home cinema system then the chances of me ever being able to watch the 1953 horror classic *House of Wax* in its (absolutely sensational) native stereoscopic form would be next-to-none. With a compatible setup, all it took was importing the superb all-region 3D Blu-ray that Warner Bros. recently released in the US.

Then, of course, there is Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* – the single most persuasive and immersive 3D film I have ever experienced. And thanks to my trusty stereoscopic set-up I'll be able to relive *Gravity* as it was intended to be seen, as often as I want, when the film hits 3D Blu-ray next year.

And it's not just me, either. When we asked on the HCC Facebook page whether we should watch the 2D or 3D version of *Pacific Rim* first, the resulting comments were a win for the funny-glasses version. It was clear that film fans have invested in the hardware, and want to reap the rewards.

So I'm going to carry on ignoring those who say that domestic 3D is dead. As far as I'm concerned it's looking healthier than ever ■

Do you still watch films in 3D on your home cinema setup? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek watches so much 3D TV that he can often be spotted walking around Sevenoaks in his 3D spex, having forgotten he was wearing them



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Certified: AV-Holics!

Over the last 12 months we reported on some fantastic setups, and here we revisit our favourites. First up: **Barry Farrelly** shares the secrets behind his clutter-free attic cinema room

Barry tucked his kit rack into the wall, next to a mini fridge



A trio of Paradigm Cinema 110s were fitted behind the custom-made projector screen, while discs are stored in a pull-out unit





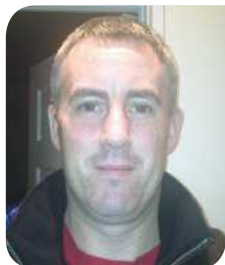
After a series of demos, Barry opted for an Epson EH-TW3500 projector, rating it best for performance at its price point



A Yamaha RX-V667 provides amplification and processing for the 7.1 system, while sources include a Sky+HD box, Sony BD player and TiVo media player

The rear speakers are fitted in-wall, while dipoles take care of traditional surround duties. The room itself is cleanly styled – as per Barry's wife's instructions!

THIS ELEGANTLY FINISHED cinema room is the pride and joy of Barry Farrelly. A 39-year-old Dubliner, Barry says he's been into home cinema for over a decade – since his then fiancée (now wife) bought him a Sony DVD all-in-one system. 'Ever since then I have been upgrading!'



More recently, Barry saw an attic conversion in *HCC* where the speakers were mounted behind a Seymour AV acoustically transparent screen. 'This got me thinking,' he reveals. 'I now thought I would have enough space for a projection screen in my own attic conversion.'

While doing some research on the Seymour AV screen, our AV-holic saw on the company's

'I wanted the biggest screen possible – fixed frame, set into the eaves. We decided we could go to 96in'

website that it sold its CentreStage XD screen material for people to make their own DIY screens. 'My mind went into overdrive and I was off and running,' recalls Barry. 'The decision was made: I was going to turn my attic into a dedicated home cinema with a PJ.'

Father, son and the lowly cost

With a fairly tight budget and his carpenter father willing to help, the obvious solution was to do all the work themselves, with a few targets to aim at – Barry's spouse insisted that the finished room must look neat and tidy, without 'wires everywhere', and ideally there would be storage space for his 500+ collection of discs.



First on the agenda for the 16ft by 15ft room was the design. 'I wanted the biggest screen possible, fixed frame, set into the eaves of the attic. I decided to go for a 16:9 aspect ratio. There was a chimney breast on one side of the wall we were using so this dictated the design of the unit we would build. We wanted the screen to sit symmetrically in the middle of the wall – the plan was to build an equipment rack on the other side of the chimney breast to frame the screen.'

'The measurements were done, triple-checked, and we decided we could fit a 96in screen in the space we had. That was the beauty of the Seymour AV material – you could order it cut to size so we didn't have to work with a standard screen size and could fit in exactly what we wanted.' Once the material arrived, Barry and his dad

constructed the screen using bullnosed architrave wrapped in black velvet. Then it was time to install the ceiling-mounted Epson LCD projector. 'I selected the Epson EH-TW3500 after a demo of it and a few other models around the same price. The Epson met all my requirements and for me gave the best picture quality.' The duo then did the rest of the construction and install over the course of a weekend, running all of the required cables in-wall, fitting the storage unit and mounting the screen. 'I then hooked up all the equipment, did the calibration and we were done.'

With other hardware including a Yamaha RX-V667 AV receiver, Sony BDP-S360 Blu-ray deck, Sky+HD, Paradigm speakers and a Vibe subwoofer, this room looks ready to rumble. And we assume Mrs Farrelly is happy with the styling, too... ■

One-man movie den

HCC reader **Jag Phull** reveals how his cinema 'dog house' was a real passion project



Jag's room took around six months to complete, but looks well worth it!



HOW DID HCC reader Jag Phull end up having a high-end movie den sitting at the bottom of his garden? With a lot of hard graft and a few upgrades along the way...

Why did you decide to build your own cinema room?

My brother-in-law once brought a projector over to my place. The image it fired up left my jaw on the floor. I wanted it. I wanted the

cinema experience at home. Over the years, I've developed my passion and at one point converted my main reception room into a part-lounge/part-theatre. Whenever I watched a film I was eventually asked to turn the volume down. I simply couldn't enjoy my movies. So, with garden space available a decision was made. I needed a mancave – and, whenever I was in trouble with the missus, a 'dog house'.

That's what I eventually labelled it. It became a pleasure being sent out to my very own dog house. I could crank the volume up as loud as I wanted. It was a no-brainer!

How long did it take you ?

Building work commenced in August 2009. Builders completed the shell by the end of October 2009. The remaining construction work was completed by myself between



Jag's garden before the build started – he decided to take his cinema outside so he could crank up the volume as much as he wanted



With the foundations finished – at a depth of over two metres – the bricklaying could begin. Areas for both a cinema and storage space were incorporated



Roof on, windows glazed, gutters fitted – it was finally time for our AV-holic to dismiss the builders and get stuck into the room's interior

October and early February 2010. Since then I've done further works in the theatre, namely the building of a stage for additional seating, painting the walls a darker lush suede paint and adding velvet panels closer to the screen to reduce reflections. The eventual outcome produced a much better and deeper image. The project is never, however, totally complete as the upgrade bug seems to bite time and time again.

What was the hardest part of the build?

The most difficult point in the build came during the groundworks. It felt like it was all over when the building inspector arrived and instructed us to dig deeper – now for the third time! We had initially dug for some one-and-a-half metres. Tons and tons of clay soil had been dug out but we expected to find harder ground. I was advised that if we didn't reach

'The four-metre 'Scope ratio screen produces a cinematic experience without the dreaded black bars'

harder ground the project would be brought to a halt. Eventually we were given the go-ahead, but the thought that the whole meticulously designed project was about to come to an end left me very stressed and anxious.

Other more difficult parts in the build were generally those many occasions when works requiring at least two people had to be done by me, myself and I. My builder had been contracted to build the general shell and complete the electrics. The room was given a skim, the floor was laid and that was it. Wires were left capped off for my as-yet-unpurchased wall lights. There were many occasions when I'd have to set up a pile of crates to hold bits in place whilst I joined wood and hung up MDF. The most depressing moment came when I entered the room

having loosely hung up the underside of a pelmet only for it to have sagged overnight.

If you did do it again, is there anything that you would do differently?

The one structural change I'd perhaps have made is the addition of a toilet. Either myself or guests often need to make the long march back indoors since the theatre is around 40 metres away from the house. The beauty with a home cinema, of course, is that is that I can pause a film if I need to.

Internally, I have had infinite thoughts on what I could do differently and have already upgraded. Added to the mix now are an ISCO II anamorphic lens, four-metre CinemaScope ratioscreen, Sony VPL-HW50ES projector and a Darbee Darblet.

I had an issue with my original three-metre wide, 16:9 screen. It just didn't seem big enough to me after a rare visit to my local plex. The four-metre 'Scope screen produces a greater level of 'wow factor' and a more involving cinematic experience without the dreaded black bars. 3D is also so much more immersive with the larger screen.

How often do you use the room?

Here I'll confess that the answer is 'not often enough'. Probably three or four times a month if I'm lucky. Each occasion is, however, an event and memorable. For me there's nothing more pleasing than clicking the macro on the remote and watching the electric curtains open, lights dim and the projector fire up.

How much did you spend on the project?

The erection of the general build was costly. If I'd had a shell to work from – perhaps an old storage room or garage – I'd have saved lots of money. Focusing on expenses once the shell was up I'd say the overall cost was less than £8,000. I was able to save a substantial amount of money having carried out the hard graft myself. I searched the world for bargains online. The wall lights as seen in the room were purchased at the grand rate of £1 each! ■



The room's original projector screen was a 16:9 ratio, 134in model from Carada – but movies can now be enjoyed in 'Scope ratio at up to four metres



Look – no speakers! The whole front soundstage is cleverly hidden away, as are the surrounds. Only the rear channels are on show at the back of the room



Our AV-holic went as far as drawing his own 3D renders during the planning process – but the finished result is actually quite different to this early mock-up



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A plan down under

Brisbane-based **Damien Buckley** reveals how he finally got his dream: a dedicated cinema room



This stylish home theatre was designed and built by Damien and a tradesman friend

Introduce yourself...

I'm Damien Buckley, 38 – a Yorkshire exile now living in Brisbane, Australia. My wife, Renee, and I have run our own graphic/web design business from home for just over eight years now. Renee does most of the creative and print work while I look after the web design and technical stuff.

What made you decide to build your own cinema room?

I'd built up most of the equipment prior to buying this house in 2011, but never had anywhere to set things up properly so it all got lumped into a combined lounge/dining/kitchen area – a huge waste given what I've invested in it. For instance, the previous rental

house had my rear speakers hanging under the kitchen breakfast-bar at the back of the room – not exactly prime position. Add to that the tiled floor and large areas of glass and there was no chance of ever getting the sound the equipment was capable of delivering.

Also, we have three-year-old and 10-month-old daughters so having a room



Before becoming a movie den, the room sported what Damien describes as a 'horror bar' with 1970s timber ceiling-cladding and glazed tiles



A key aim of the build was to insulate it so sound didn't travel too much throughout the house – our AV-holic says this was the hardest part of job



As the room began to take shape, Damien could start to dream of taking his beloved Kuro plasma and speaker system out of storage

where my AV equipment could be secured from prying little fingers (particularly the 60in Pioneer Kuro monitor) was very appealing indeed.

I built it myself (mostly) as I didn't have the cash to have it done professionally. I did get some help along the way from a tradesman mate, and by virtue of a 'contra' deal I did with a local home theatre business to build their online store. They supplied and installed the RTI iPad control system and provided some tips on the build.

So what AV hardware do you have?

The Blu-ray player is a Cambridge Audio Azur 751BD. I also have a Cambridge Audio Azur 740C CD player, a Panasonic DMR-BW500 combined Blu-ray recorder/PVR and a Humax HDR-7500T PVR. Other sources are an Apple TV and a Microsoft Xbox 360 for bigscreen gaming on the Pioneer KRP-600M Kuro.

Audio comes via a Pioneer SC-LX90 AV receiver, feeding a Velodyne CHT-12R subwoofer, Monitor Audio RS6/RS-LCR and RSFX speakers, plus Denon SC-M7 bookshelves at the rear.

Other kit includes an Isotek Aquarius mains conditioner, aforementioned RTI control system and cables from Chord, QED, van den Hul, Wireworld and Key Digital.

How long did you spend on the build?

The project spanned over twelve months from moving into the property, mainly because getting the rest of the house into shape took precedence. Availability of funds and finding the time were major factors, too. Things progressed very slowly, which was a huge frustration. My entire setup sat boxed in our spare bedroom the whole time!

What was the hardest part of the whole process?

Getting the insulation in, and double-sheeting the ceiling using Green Glue. That was tricky and hot work in the tropical climate here. Running the multitude of cabling from the rack cupboard at the back to the front of the room

before sheeting was no simple task either.

If you did it again, is there anything that you would do differently?

If I sat down and thought about it, I'm sure there are a lot of things I'd do differently and in future I may find I haven't allowed for certain things wiring-wise. However, the room was done with little research, limited time and a very limited budget so, all considered, I'm happy with the result.

How often do you use the room?

We use the room most evenings to watch TV, and I hole-up to play *Halo* online from time to time, too.

What do your friends and family think of your home cinema?

Renee thinks it's great. It's a nice room to be in and we enjoy watching our favourite TV shows in there. And our three-year-old loves watching *Toy Story* and other animated movies on the bigscreen TV. Renee's main stipulation when I started the project was to cut down the sound output, so she didn't feel like she was living in a war zone when I get online to play games, and she's happy with the result in that regard.

My friends probably think I'm a bit mad to spend that much time and money on it, but love to come over and watch Blu-ray movies all the same.

What's your current favourite disc?

I'm thoroughly enjoying *Game of Thrones*.

Finally, roughly how much did you spend on the project?

I can honestly say I don't know. The project spanned over a year with a multitude of materials bought here and there, rather than in one go, and I had most of the equipment to start with – most of which I bargained pretty hard on at purchase.

I dread to think what it would have cost to have it built professionally from scratch with the equipment supplied ■

ALL HAIL THE SUSANO!



Ultimate performance: At the heart of Damien's AV setup is Pioneer's near-legendary SC-LX90 receiver. Nicknamed Susano by the engineering team (in honour of a Japanese storm god), this 10-channel, 1,400W beast thudded onto shop shelves in 2008, weighing over 30kg and sporting a two-tier fascia design and innovative 5in LCD monitor window. THX Ultra2 certified and fine-tuned at the AIR Studios in London, it offers a monstrous sound – both massively powerful and beautifully refined. Originally priced at a reassuringly expensive £5,000, you'll be hard-pressed to find one on eBay. Owners aren't too keen to part with it!

Rear access to the kit rack means troubleshooting and cable maintenance isn't too awkward



Seating is provided by these comfy-looking leather recliners – the perfect base for Damien's online *Halo* adventures



There's enough storage space for a growing collection of games and movies



Top-tier cinema



AV-Holic **Alex Xidakis** explains how he turned his new loft into a cinema room without breaking the bank

Introduce yourself...

I'm Alex Xidakis, 34 and a Manufacturing Engineer.

How long have you been an AV-Holic?

I think the signs were there from the age of 10 or 12, when I would move my Dad's stereo system to the TV before watching movies, so I could experience them with *stereo* sound! I put my first hi-fi/HT system together in 1998.

When did you decide to convert your loft into a cinema room?

We bought our house just over five years ago and among the things I was looking for was a loft that could be converted into a home cinema. I've always thought it's the ideal place for a cinema room because you can control the sources of external light and – because it's out of the way – you can minimise the amount of sound escaping to the rest of the house.

Did you do it all yourself or did you bring in the professionals?

I obtained quotes a couple of years ago for

both the build and the drawing up of plans but they were extortionate. I'm an engineer by profession so felt I was more than capable of doing the required research and calculations as far as Building Regulations are concerned, so ended up doing all the plans myself. I'm also a keen DIY-er and had decided on doing the build myself too but, due to an accident just before we'd planned to start, I brought in a builder to do the conversion. I did the decorating myself, though.

How long did the build take?

The builder was working on a part-time basis so the work took about three months.

Is there anything you'd do differently if you did it again?

I would have taken the very heavy, old Edwardian chair and sofa into the room before the stud wall was built around the stairwell – the sofa needed modification, two friends and some precision manoeuvring but we got it up there! Other than that, I think the end result is perfection – even if I do say so myself.

Alex designed the room layout and handled the decoration himself



The room houses a growing Blu-ray collection – all bought way below RRP



Our AV-Holic always wanted a loft to convert...

What kit's in the setup?

A Panasonic PT-AE5000 projector sits outside the cinema room, beaming pictures onto a custom-built screen via a small opening on the rear wall. A Panasonic DMP-BDT500 Blu-ray player spins the discs and handles HD audio decoding, feeding via its six-channel outs to a Primare SPA21 AV amplifier. The 5.1 speaker setup consists of Tannoy Revolution R3s, R2s and RC speakers and a REL Strata 5 sub.

Roughly how much have you spent on it?

I can tell you exactly how much because I've kept a record of every piece of kit I've bought since 1998, noting the amount paid compared to its RRP. I know that for my current HT setup I've spent £5,031, which through negotiation on new kit and by buying discontinued items, is just 63 per cent of RRP. As for Blu-ray discs, my first one was purchased this year following completion of the cinema room but the collection is quickly growing and I'm paying £4.50 on average for discs, thanks to a well-known online auction site and an expanding second-hand high-street market.



...and was soon getting his hands dirty in his new house

What's next on your equipment wish list?

I'm watching out for all sorts at the moment including M&K Sound speakers, Bryston and Primare power amps and a second REL sub. What is a definite, though, is that I'll be building an HTPC soon because I want to start shows

'I'm an engineer by trade so felt more than comfortable doing the required research and calculations'

off with the Pearl & Dean titles followed by some trailers. That Pearl and Dean music really gives you the genuine cinema feeling!

What's your favourite bit of kit?

Easy – the Primare. Prior to the cinema room, my stereo and HT systems were combined, with the Primare the ideal component to sit in the middle due to its brilliance with music.



The Panasonic PJ is sited outside the room

Despite its inability to process HD audio formats (now not a problem thanks to the Panasonic deck), it forms the heart of the HT setup, sounding and looking fantastic.

What do your friends think of the room?

I've had nothing but positive comments, which is pleasing because it took a long time to draw up the plans and almost as long to settle on the décor! When they see the room for the first time, family and friends are a bit speechless before being full of praise. A few have said I should charge an entry fee but they seem to say that after the show has already finished!

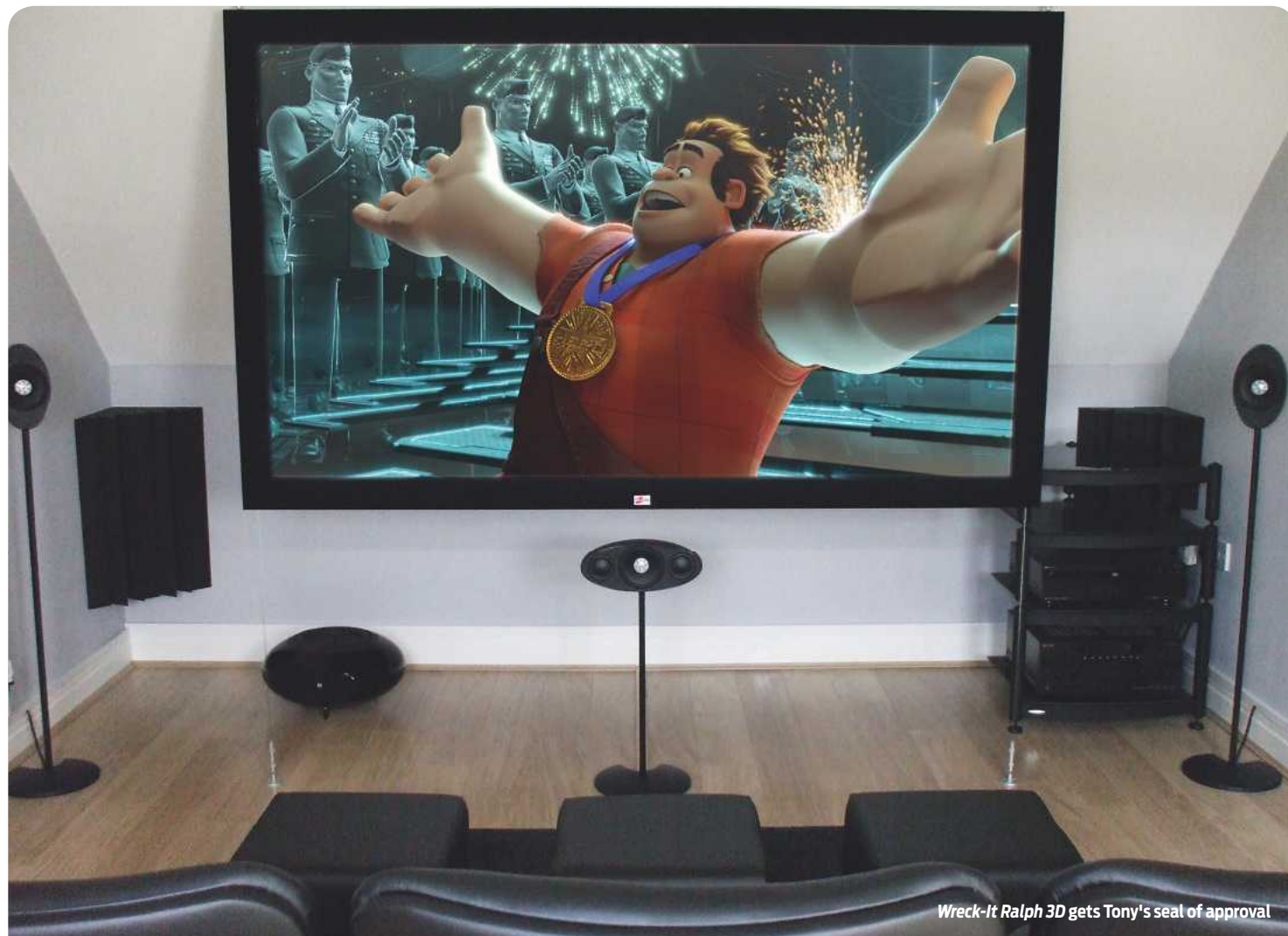
What's your favourite Blu-ray?

Can I only choose one? In that case it's ...*The Empire Strikes Back*. Fingers crossed that Disney gets things back on track!

What do you use to show off the system?

Something like *The Dark Knight Rises* with its impeccable picture and sound. *Wall-E* has just dropped through the letter box, though, so I might use that one now, too... ■

Twice as nice...



AV-Holic **Tony Oxtoby** has two surround sound setups – now that's a proper home cinema choice...

Introduce yourself...

I'm Tony Oxtoby, 57. I'm an ICT Network Manager, with a very understanding wife. I've always had a love of cinema, from watching black-and-white movies with my mother to today's action blockbusters, so when the children finally left home three years ago, I felt the time was right to build a home cinema of my own.

What kit is in your setup?

I selected the AV equipment following extensive research at the time and chose a Beamax A-Velvet fixed-frame screen and Sony VPL-HW10 projector. The player and amp are from Sony, too – a BDP-S5000ES and STR-DA5400ES. The latter feeds the KEF KHT3005 7.1 array. Extras include an Atacama

Equinox equipment rack, Atlas cables and Lindy mains conditioner. This, I felt, was the best I could afford at the time.

Your projector installation looks rather innovative...

I knew the best way to get a true home cinema experience was a projector setup, but the room (which is at the top of the house and can be made completely dark) threw up a challenge right from the start – the best location for the screen and projector meant fitting the screen on a sloping wall!

I was going to make a pelmet or frame but I wasn't happy with either idea. The solution came to me when looking at a display in a shop window where they had large boards suspended on cables. I adapted the idea to

suspend the Beamax screen. It worked perfectly with no modification; I just used the screws that were used to assemble the screen and fixed the cables to it. This gave the room and the screen a unique look that has worked really well.

What other problems did you overcome when fitting out the cinema room?

I spent a long time looking for the right type of seating. I initially tried beanbag-style chairs but they were not as comfortable as I thought they would have been. Eventually I found a company, Evertaut Ltd from Blackburn, which manufactures cinema seating and seemed perfect. I decided on a bank of three chairs in black leather with matching footstools – which could also be used when my grandchildren



Three dedicated chairs for adults; footstools for the grandchildren

watched a movie with me. I installed the main seating on a floating plinth to allow correct positioning as recommended by Dolby. I added carpeting to deaden reflective areas on the floor and bass traps to aid sound conditioning in the corners of the room. I added some artwork that's also used as sound treatment (they match the cube stools). The lighting is on a remote dimmable control.

The seating position and the sound settings seem perfect for an immersive 7.1 experience.

You've got another setup, too...

Yes, once I'd finished the cinema room I turned my attention to the living room. I researched all of the latest technology within my price range – I enjoy doing the research as much as I do installing the equipment! I finally selected a Panasonic plasma TV as the hub of the system; I feel plasma still gives the best image. The AVR here is a Pioneer VSX-S500; the BD player is a Panasonic DMP-BDT330. Speakers are, again, from KEF – here in a 6.1 array.

What's been your favourite equipment purchase so far?

The KEF KHT3005 speaker system. I have used this in both the cinema room and the living room. It has a hard-to-beat aesthetic quality, an awesome-looking subwoofer and terrific sound qualities. I am equally delighted with my Norstone Galby TV



The cinema room uses a Sony VPL-HW10 PJ – but Tony has his eye on a 4K replacement

stand, and the Panasonic TX-P50GT60B TV is simply awesome.

What do your friends and family think of your cinema obsession?

All have been greatly impressed by both rooms, even Heather (my wife) and she is known to be hard to please! One of my friends who visited

'The KEF system has hard-to-beat aesthetics, an awesome sub and terrific sound quality'

the cinema room said that if he had the same setup at home, he would never leave. Both rooms have been finished with my usual picknickety finish (according to the wife!). All cables are hidden where possible, everything is labelled, all electrical joints and banana plugs have had shrink tubing applied.

What's your favourite Blu-ray disc?

It's hard to choose my favourite, but when pushed, I have narrowed it down to seven. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Forbidden Planet*, *Star Wars*, *Toy Story* and *The Lion, The Witch*



Panasonic's new DMP-BDT330 handles disc duties in the lounge

and the *Wardrobe*. These films include some milestones in movie-making and have become family favourites. If I want to show off my system, however, *The Dark Knight Rises* or *Avengers Assemble* are sure to excite. In the living room, *Life of Pi* shows off the picture quality in both 2D and 3D, and *Tron: Legacy* is fantastic. I am about to revisit the complete *Harry Potter* series, which, believe it or not, my wife has never seen. We will watch this in the living room so we can see how it compares to the upstairs cinema.

How much have you spent on your setups?

Approximately £15,000 on both, including all the room changes, but the enjoyment I and my family and friends have had from this is immeasurable.

Lastly: are you excited by 4K?

My cinema room is ready to be made 4K as I believe this will be the next big thing. I feel that 3D is still a novelty but for occasional special viewing it does offer a unique experience – *Wreck-It Ralph* was great fun.

Obviously I shall do the same research before choosing the equipment but I am very excited by the 4K equipment that Sony is developing. It would still be a projector (the Sony 4K looks amazing) and a screen to provide that true cinema feel, so they are the next items on my wish list ■



At the top of everyone's shortlist











Shed heaven!



Paul's room as it was in 2009 – it now houses additional height and width speakers

AV-Holic **Paul Slim**, owner of a glorious home-cinema-in-a-shed, returns to *HCC* to explain the benefits brought about from adding 3D and additional speakers

THIS HOME CINEMA may be familiar to some of you, as it was first featured in the magazine back in 2009. A projector-based setup in a custom-built shed in a garden, it looks nondescript from the outside, but houses cutting-edge kit and plenty of seating and space for an ever-expanding Blu-ray collection. And when its owner, *HCC* reader Paul Slim, got back in touch to tell us he'd upgraded much of the system to include full 11.2-channel audio and 3D, we decided it was time to become reacquainted with the room known as 'Reelwood'...

So, what's been the best thing about having your own garden-shed cinema room?

I'm quite a quiet person – I don't go round telling everyone about it – but the word spread

and it has got me jobs with Best Buy (they interviewed me in the shed) and Carphone Warehouse/Geek Squad, to the point where the CEO knows me as 'Paul with the shed'!

It is a great place to relax and watch movies. In particular, the sound of movies is my passion, so to be able to watch and listen to movies and music, as the artist or director intended them to be heard and seen, is always a good thing. And, as it's in the garden and I have understanding neighbours, I can also have it at levels that most people probably wouldn't be able to in their homes.

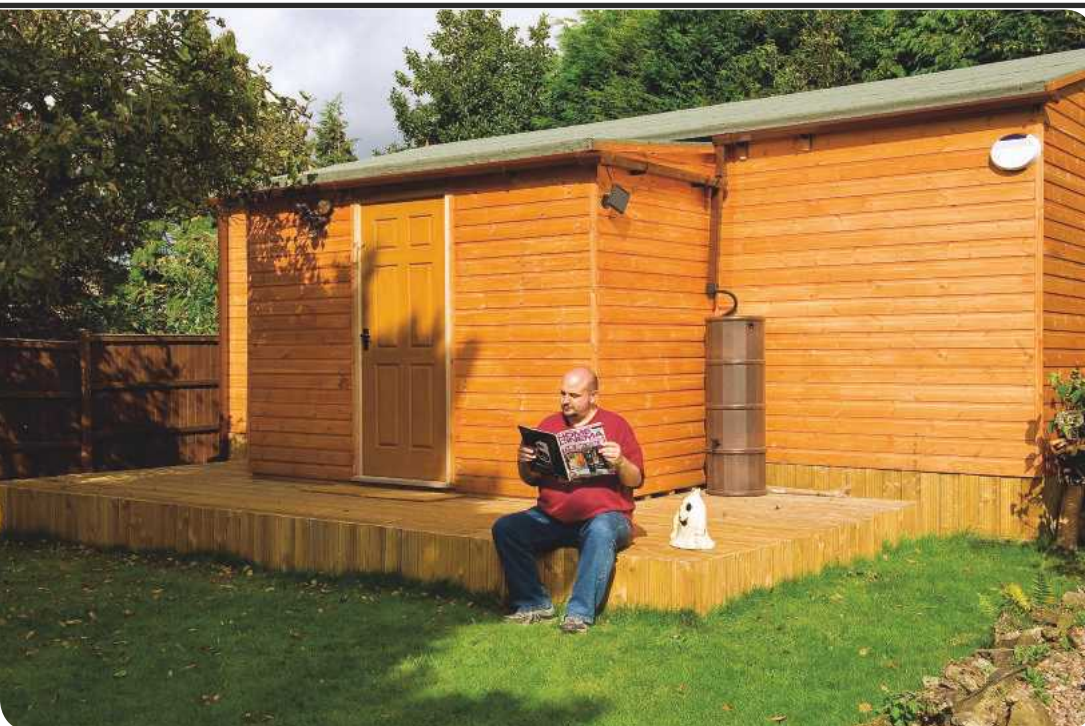
How often do you use it?

Not as much as I would like – I would say once or twice a week at most. Sunday nights is the only definite weekly event. My friends and I

have been ordering food and watching a movie on Sunday nights since the mid '90s – that's stayed a tradition.

You've added 11.2 surround: what kit are you using, and what's your verdict on height/width channels? Is it something other *HCC* readers should consider?

I'm using an Onkyo TX-NR5010 as the main receiver and a Denon AVR-2805 to power the width speakers. They definitely complete the soundstage – it sounds amazing with the height/width switched off but when you switch them on the whole front soundstage opens up. Although they are not discrete, if you unplug the main left, centre and right there is no bleed, the only sounds you can hear are the ones that should be there. I've listened



No home cinema is complete without a replica of Ted – especially if he's wearing 3D glasses...

Paul relaxes outside his bespoke hi-tech shed with a copy of his favourite magazine



Each year, Paul decks the room out for Halloween horror-thons



The rear of the room is devoted to our AV-Holic's massive disc collection

to near-whole movies with just the 'FX' speakers plugged in to hear what it decides to locate to each speaker and it's very clever and really interesting.

I'm still trying to decide which I prefer out of the two types of 11.2 modes – DTS Neo:X or Audyssey's DSX – as, unbelievably, compared to the 7.1 decoders they both create different audible mixes. I would say DTS spreads the sound around a bit more and possibly emphasises the music and more subtle effects whereas DSX is more direct and places off-screen FX and dialogue in the wides that DTS would keep in the L/C/R.

I would advise people to give it a go if their receiver has the option of extra channels and if the room (or their partner!) allows for it – just don't expect everything you watch to have sounds coming from above! The extra speakers are mainly used for subtle effects and music to expand the ambience, but I feel it's definitely worth the upgrade and I wouldn't ever go back. We even have height channels in the bedroom now!

What films have blown you away in 11.2?

This is a tough one as since I have had the receiver I've watched everything in 11.2! Everything just sounds better.

I'm always listening out for killer demo material (who cares if the movie was any good as long as there was good demo scene, right?). I have tried the two Lionsgate discs that have the optimised-for-11.1 audio (*The Expendables 2* and *Dredd 3D*) but didn't find any specific scenes where the heights or widths were used for exact spot effects (other than the channel checkers, which are great!) compared to any other 'non-optimised' movie.

An excellent scene that does use all of the speakers to great effect is the opening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Right from the opening shot the sounds of the jungle fill the air, then when the birds fly from the statue's mouth the scared guide runs off into the left-wide speaker. Later, Indy cracks his whip across the soundfield, panning from the left to right heights down to the bottom left-wide, ending with a gunshot from the right width which then

echoes all around the room. And when the rolling boulder happens, it makes use of the extra height and width to convey the sheer size and weight of it – having two subs helps!

You've also upgraded to 3D – what's your favourite 3D Blu-ray?

I really enjoyed the conversion of *Jurassic Park*. That along with *Titanic* are two definite discs to show people that a movie doesn't have to be shot in 3D to be a really good 3D movie. *Avatar* is still one of the best, especially for its 'wow-factor' visuals and sound. Or, if people want to see things poking them in the eye in pretty much any scene, try *Madagascar 3*! ■

BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic, and we'll be in touch.



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FILM FRANCHISE

The Lord of the Rings

We pay a visit to Middle-earth to celebrate Tolkien's cinematic legacy



Weta's computer-animated Gollum remains one of the most convincing 'virtual characters' ever created



IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO overstate the impact that Tolkien's fantasy novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* had on pop culture. From the role-playing games to Led Zeppelin's music, the legacy of Tolkien's writing can be found everywhere. And yet – despite the all-pervasive nature of the author's epic fantasy saga – it took Hollywood more than two decades to bring *The Lord of the Rings* to the big screen.

That's not to say that Tinseltown studios had been resistant to the lure of Middle-earth until then. In fact, numerous attempts were made to film *The Lord of the Rings* in the late '50s and throughout the '60s, with the likes of Stanley Kubrick and John Boorman said to have been attached. But none of them came to

Bilbo sets off on his unexpected journey...

anything until Ralph Bakshi's animated adaptation in 1978 – but even that only tackled the first half of the story, and wasn't successful enough to get the concluding sequel it needed.

Hobbit-forming

Thankfully, the innovative nature of Bakshi's animated adaptation ensured that it stuck in the mind of pretty much all of those who saw it – including Peter Jackson.

It would be Jackson's enduring passion for Tolkien's books and his association with the





Ring-mania: The Beatles were linked to one failed attempt to film *The Lord of the Rings*. In case you're wondering, Frodo was to be played by Paul, Sam by Ringo, Gandalf by George and Gollum by John.

Fanning the flames: Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy inspired several fan films. *The Hunt for Gollum* and *Born of Hope* (pictured) are among the best and can be watched for free online.



ground-breaking Weta Workshop special effects company that enabled him to realise what other filmmakers couldn't with an epic live-action adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Not only did Jackson's award-winning trilogy win over critics and audiences, it also revolutionised the DVD market with the feature-packed Extended Edition releases. And, despite promising he'd never do anything on the same scale again, Jackson's now midway through a similarly grand adaptation of *The Hobbit* that is wowing fans all over again...

PICK OF THE BEST...

1 The Fellowship of the Ring: Extended Edition

The first part of Peter Jackson's epic trilogy is pretty much perfect in the way that it brings Tolkien's characters and locations to life on the big screen, feeling tight and fast-paced across its 178-minute running time. Also, here Frodo is at his least annoying and whiny.

2 The Return of the King: Extended Edition

Yes, there are too many scenes of people saying goodbye to each other at the end, but this trilogy-closer makes up for it with the astonishing battle scenes unleashed on the way. In terms of awe-inspiring cinematic spectacle, this film is in a class of its own.

3 The Lord of the Rings (1978)

Ralph Bakshi's innovative animated adaptation comes to an end long before Tolkien's story does, but remains a remarkably effective and creepy take on the source material that has proved a potent influence on Jackson's live-action films.

AND THE WORST...

The Return of the King (1980)

Following its success with *The Hobbit* three years earlier and with a sequel to Bakshi's animated feature looking more and more unlikely, seasonal TV specialist Rankin/Bass pressed ahead with this animated TV take on the final part of *The Lord of the Rings*. Choppy animation, joyless performances and rubbish folk songs make it one for completists only.

COLLECTIBLES

No self-respecting Tolkien fan can afford to miss out on these...

The One Ring



Handcrafted at the Jens Hansen jewellery shop in New Zealand in 18K solid gold, this replica really is the One Ring to rule them all.

Available with or without runes...

The Lord of the Rings: The Trilogy



20 years before *The Fellowship of the Ring* hit cinemas, BBC Radio 4 broadcast what many still feel is the definitive dramatisation

of Tolkien's fantasy novel. If you want to find out what all the fuss is about, the entire saga is available to enjoy in a CD boxset.

LEGO: The Lord of the Rings



What's not to enjoy about controlling super-cute LEGO versions of your favourite Tolkien characters as you relive *The Lord of the Rings* in videogame form? Great fun for wizards of all ages.

Gollum Life-Size Statue



\$3,000 will buy you this 140cm tall fibreglass statue of Gollum perched on top of a rock. Sculpted by Weta Workshop's Ben Hawker and Bill Hunt, the statue will be extremely limited and starts shipping in Spring 2014.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION...

Want to complete your collection of Tolkien discs? Then you'll need these...

The Hobbit [1977]
(R1 DVD – US Import)

The Lord of the Rings [1978]
(R2 DVD)

The Return of the King [1980]
(R1 DVD – US Import)

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring – Extended Edition Gift Set
(R2 DVD)

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers – Extended Edition Gift Set (R2 DVD)
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King –



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The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy
(R2 DVD)

The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy – Special Extended DVD Edition
(R2 DVD)

The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy (Region B BD)

The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy – Extended Edition
(Region B BD)

The Lord of the Rings [1978] (All-region BD)

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey 3D (All-region BD)

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey 3D – Extended Edition (All-region BD)

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Onkyo TX-NR818
Network 7.2 Receiver

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Yamaha RX-A1020
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+ Q Acoustics 7000i (5.1)

~~£1398~~ **£1029**



Yamaha RX-V673
+ Focal Dome (5.1)

~~£1999~~ **£1095**



Denon AVR-X2000
+ Focal Dome (5.1)

~~£1999~~ **£1119**



Yamaha RX-V673
+ DALI ZENSOR 5 (5.1)

~~£1928~~ **£1375**



Yamaha RX-A1030
+ Focal Dome (5.1)

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Yamaha RX-A3030
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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **PACIFIC RIM** Is Guillermo del Toro's latest blockbuster set to be a monster smash in hi-def? **THE CONJURING** Ghostly chills and AV thrills abound **THE WOLVERINE** Extended cut unleashes even more mutant mayhem in Japan **MONSTERS UNIVERSITY** Toga! Toga! Toga! **THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY** Bigger and better than ever on Blu-ray **AND MUCH MORE!**



Hi-def heroics

Man of Steel 3D → Warner Home Video → All-region BD/R1 DVD (US Import)

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's Superman! The comic book legend returns to your screen this month as *Man of Steel* hits 3D Blu-ray. Turn to p142 to find out just how super it really is...

HCC RATINGS KEY...	
Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

If only we'd had monster-killing Jaegers back when Godzookie was around...



Clash of the blockbuster titans

Cinematic spectacle reaches new heights when giant robots go to war with massive monsters

→ PACIFIC RIM 3D

In the near future our world has become subject to invasions by gigantic alien monsters known as Kaiju. To combat them, the world's superpowers come together and develop the Jaegers, huge robotic mechs operated by a pair of mind-linked pilots. For a while it looked like humanity had succeeded in stemming the invasion – but that's when it all started to go horribly wrong...

Guillermo del Toro's latest is an love letter to Japanese monster movies and anime that delivers more pulse-pounding, epic-scale action than genre fans could ever hope for. Who cares if the human drama is a little thinly-sketched? This is a film about giant robots fighting giant monsters – and if that's your thing, then *Pacific Rim* delivers it in spades.

Picture: Whether you opt to watch it in 2D or 3D (provided on separate discs in this release) *Pacific Rim* looks mind-blowingly good on Blu-ray.

While much of the live-action material was converted to 3D in post, the visual effects were created in 'stereo' – and as so much of the film involves largescale CG fight sequences, this is where the 3D MVC 1.78:1 1080p encode excels.

The 2D AVC 1.78:1 1080p shares the same gorgeous detailing and clarity as its stereoscopic sibling, but adds slightly most robust colours, deeper blacks and even greater sharpness. Simply brilliant.

Audio: Many people will probably find *Pacific Rim*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix to be a thrilling affair, packed with booming bass and expansive use of the



HCC VERDICT

Pacific Rim 3D

→ Warner Home Video

→ All-region BD → £28 Approx

WE SAY: An otherwise spectacular HD set marred only by a baffling decision to downgrade the audio in the UK

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

surrounds. And judged on its own merits, it's not a bad blockbuster soundtrack at all – although for our tastes the separation across the soundstage could be a touch crisper and clearer.

The real problem is that the US release delivered both the 5.1 mix included here and an even more eventful higher bitrate DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix. Why Warner decided to drop the latter from the UK release is a mystery. But whatever the reason, for a magazine that caters for those most likely to have 7.1 set-ups, it's impossible for us not to recommend importing the US release instead.

Extras: The 2D version of the film is accompanied by an audio commentary by the director, and while we usually prefer group chat tracks to solo efforts, del Toro is one of the exceptions to the rule. He rarely pauses for breath as he discusses his love of Gerry Anderson's *Thunderbirds*, Japanese monster movies and the film's myriad other inspirations, whilst simultaneously offering yet another unmissable masterclass on the filmmaking process.

Also included on the disc are 13 Focus Point featurettes that prove much more informative and open than traditional EPK featurettes and boast a combined running time of just over an hour.

The set's final Blu-ray disc hosts even more bonus material. There's an analysis of the film's 'Drift Space' imagery, a look at the creation of the visual effects, a blooper reel, four deleted scenes, a gallery of animatics and concept art, and an interactive 'Director's Notebook' containing del Toro's notes and sketches alongside six additional featurettes.

Only God Forgives

Lionsgate → Region B BD
£25 Approx



After the mainstream success of *Drive*, director Nicolas Winding Refn returns to the more

expressionist cinema of *Valhalla Rising* with this hypnotic, violent, beautiful and pretentious revenge thriller. Whether you actually 'get' the film or not, there's no denying that visually it's a work of art, something this BD's neon-saturated AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode makes apparent in every single scene. The disc's throbbing DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is every match for its searing visuals. Bonus goodies take the form of a chat-track from the director, a short *Making of...* featurette, trailers and poster art galleries.



The Purge

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



The home invasion sub-genre gets a new twist in this near-future thriller set in a society

where all crimes are made legal on one night every twelve months. Presented as a way of cutting crime for the rest of the year, it's definitely an intriguing idea, but one that doesn't really get much consideration beyond setting up what turns out to be a bog-standard tale of a family trapped in a house and besieged by a group of psychos. While this Blu-ray does at least deliver a proficient AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix, it can only manage one solitary behind-the-scenes featurette.



RED 2

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Bruce Willis, John Malkovich and Helen Mirren trot out their 'wrinkly warrior' schtick

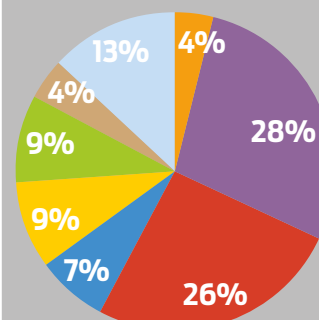
again in a generic sequel that plays everything much too safe and lacks the killer edge that made the first film so much fun. At least the by-the-numbers action scenes ensure that the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix gets to show off a bit; crashing cars and firing bullets around the soundstage. The AVC-encoded 2.40:1 1080p transfer also holds up well with rich colours and intricate detailing. The extras prove just as ho-hum as the film and take the form of four brief featurettes, a gag reel and five deleted scenes.



WE ASKED...

Which was the best of 2013's blockbusters?

■ Oblivion ■ Iron Man 3
■ Star Trek Into Darkness
■ Fast & Furious ■ Man of Steel
■ World War Z ■ Riddick ■ Thor 2



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Summoning up some serious scares

James Wan's latest ghost story proves to be a truly hair-raising treat in high-definition

→ THE CONJURING

Purporting to be based on actual events, *The Conjuring* stars Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga as real-life paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren. Set in 1971, the film follows the Warrens' attempts to help Roger and Carolyn Perron (Ron Livingston and Lili Taylor) and their five daughters, when their new home proves to be a locus for some terrifying supernatural activity.

If this all sounds a little like *The Amityville Horror*, then it's pretty fitting, as the Warrens were best-known for their investigations into that case. And anyway, *The Conjuring* is a much more effective shocker than any of the *Amityville* flicks – thanks primarily to director James Wan, who is rapidly becoming one of the genre's brightest talents.

Picture: It may have been shot using Arri Alexa HD cameras, but that doesn't stop *The Conjuring* from looking like an authentic 1970s production. While detailing is extremely refined, the colour palette is deliberately drab, shadows are ominously dark and skin tones frequently look rather pallid.

This might not make for optimum hi-def eye candy, but is exactly the look that the filmmakers wanted. And this Blu-ray's AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode replicates it very well indeed.

Audio: As director James Wan says in one of the accompanying featurettes: 'I've always said what makes scary movies work is not so much the visuals, it's the sound. It's what you think you see through the sound design that is the most important thing'.

This definitely holds true for *The Conjuring*'s excellent DTS-HD MA 5.1 track – indeed, the mix



Not the most convincing ghost we've ever seen...

does everything you'd expect from a top-notch ghost story. Directional effects are constantly employed to spooky effect, while the LFE is withheld until the optimum moments, when it suddenly roars into life to scare the bejeezus out of you. Add to that some surprising subtlety in quieter moments and a perfect ability to prioritise dialogue no matter what else is occurring and you have a soundtrack that's pretty much impossible to fault.

Extras: Disappointingly, this Blu-ray release only manages to conjure up a very limited set of extras.

The seven-minute *The Conjuring: Face to Face with Terror* talks to the Perron family and Lorraine Warren about the events that inspired the film. On a similar tack, the 16-minute *A Life in Demonology* takes a look at the life and career of the Warrens.

Finally, *Scaring the '@\$*%' Out of You* offers an eight-minute look at the making of *The Conjuring* and James Wan's methodologies for scaring audiences.



HCC VERDICT

The Conjuring

→ Warner Home Video

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A superior scare-fest with a killer DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix – although the extras are a mite disappointing

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★★★★

Cavill was previously attached to star in McG's abandoned 2004 *Superman* film



DISC
OF THE
MONTH

Superman flies high on Blu-ray

The comic book icon's latest cinematic outing packs a truly heroic DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack



Man of Steel's picture-in-picture mode gets its own Blu-ray platter in the US, but is an UltraViolet exclusive in the UK

→ MAN OF STEEL 3D

With Batman proving to be a real hero at the box office it was inevitable that Superman would quickly follow suit. And with Christopher (*The Dark Knight*) Nolan producing, Zack (*Watchmen*) Snyder directing and David (*Blade II*) Goyer on scripting duties, fans were surely in for the Superman movie to outdo all other Superman movies. Weren't they?

Well, yes and no. The good news is that *Man of Steel* is as action-packed as you could hope for, with the kind of ridiculously exaggerated superhero action you never thought you'd see outside of a comic book. But *Man of Steel* also follows too closely in *The Dark Knight*'s footsteps by giving us a surprisingly dark and angsty take on the 'Big Blue Boy Scout' that's riddled with odd religious allusions.

Still, *Man of Steel* gets much more right than it gets wrong and represents a huge improvement on the terminally dull and referential *Superman Returns*. And with *Superman Vs Batman* on the way, it appears that the best is yet to come...

Picture: While you'd be hard-pushed to describe *Man of Steel*'s post-converted 3D visuals as being particularly demo-worthy, the MVC 2.40:1 1080p encode is more accomplished than we expected.

Snyder's fast-cutting, shaky-cam style isn't always conducive to creating cohesive stereoscopic imagery, yet the Blu-ray still serves up some convincing volumetric effects

during its action scenes. There are also a few quieter moments – such as a close-up of a child's cart lying on its side in a field or Superman reaching for Lois' hand on Zod's spaceship – that are surprisingly effective.

The 2D platter's AVC 2.40:1 1080p transfer delivers a viewing experience that seems very similar to our memories of seeing *Man of Steel* at the cinema. As with much of Snyder's work, colours are deliberated muted and there's a surfeit of digital grain in every shot (this is understandably dialled back somewhat, but not completely, in 3D). It's an authentic transfer, but perhaps not the one you'll want to use to show off what your system can do.

Audio: Do you like your lossless soundtracks to be faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive? If so, you're gonna get a kick out of the DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 mix that is replicated across the 2D and 3D versions of *Man of Steel* in this US hi-def release.

As suits Snyder's directorial style, there's no room for subtlety here. Instead, we get a visceral audio experience that thrills with its constant (and absolutely seamless) deployment of the surround speakers and some of the most potent bass effects you're ever likely to encounter. By the time you get to Chapters 12 and 13's devastation of

Metropolis you'll be enjoying the sonic equivalent of going 12 rounds in the ring with Muhammad Ali and loving every single minute of it –

Amy Adams (right) delivers an enjoyably feisty take on love interest Lois Lane

DEMO SCREEN...

Man of Steel 3D

Time code: 091.23 – 098.32



Small town showdown: Having taught Zod a lesson for daring to threaten his mother, Superman finds himself facing off against two more Kryptonians on the streets of Smallville.



Girl trouble: As Superman and Lois Lane come to blows inside a diner, the disc's DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack rocks with the weight of the punches being thrown and the destruction wrought.



Up, up and away: No matter what superpower Superman uses, the Kryptonians just keep on standing. Thankfully, the HD imagery is more than capable of keeping up with the relentless pace of the action.



Kapow: Not content with crashing helicopters around you, Faora-Ul decides to spice up the film's soundtrack even more by having a spot of superpowered fun with a squad of US soldiers

for large parts of the film's running time, *Man of Steel*'s soundtrack has seemingly been constructed for the sole purpose of annoying and/or terrifying any pets and neighbours you might have. Any true home cinema fan wouldn't want it any other way.

Extras: This US import release doesn't skimp on extra features. Up first on the 2D film disc is the *Strong Characters, Legendary Roles* featurette (26 minutes) looking at how the comic book characters were tackled in Zack Snyder's reboot.

All-Out Action (26 minutes) focuses on the fitness training that actors Henry Cavill, Michael Shannon and Antje Traue underwent, before moving on to look at the creation of the movie's action scenes.

Krypton Decoded (seven minutes) tackles the creation of the Kryptonian tech featured in the film. Also included on the disc is the superb *Superman: 75th Anniversary Animated Short* that charts the history of the character from *Action Comics* #1 to *Man of Steel* in two minutes.

Finally, there's the completely superfluous *New Zealand: Home of Middle-earth* (seven minutes), which acts as an extended promo for both Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* films and New Zealand's tourism industry. What it's doing on this Blu-ray is a complete mystery to us.



Moving over to the additional Special Features Blu-ray, you'll find the *Planet Krypton* featurette (17 minutes) and *Journey of Discovery: Creating Man of Steel* (174 minutes).

The former is a *faux* TV show looking at what we now know about Krypton and its inhabitants in the wake of the events of *Man of Steel*, while the latter is the set's answer to a 'Maximum Movie Mode' picture-in-picture feature.

While some may find the decision to put this last extra on a separate disc annoying, it's a better solution than we get in the UK, where Warner has ditched the bonus disc and is only making *Journey of Discovery...* available exclusively via UltraViolet. If you're not UV-savvy, import this all-region release!



Not since TV's *Smallville* has young Clark Kent been so troubled by growing pains



You really will believe a man can fly...



HCC VERDICT

Man of Steel 3D

→ Warner Home Video → All-region BD / R1 DVD (US Import) → £30 Approx

WE SAY: It's worth importing this definitive Blu-ray incarnation of Superman's latest adventure

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

Ubisoft → Xbox 360/PS3/PC/Wii U/Xbox One/PS4 → £50 Approx



Avast me hearties! Following the rapturous reception that greeted *Assassin's Creed III*'s naval battles, this year's sequel finds the series taking to the high seas for some piratical fun. And in doing so giving the franchise a much needed shot in the arm.



Summoning up an enormous open world of tropical islands and dangerous seas for you to explore, the game casts you in the role of 18th century buccaneer Edward Kenney. Embroiled in the ongoing war between Templars and Assassins, Edward quickly finds himself splitting his time between traditional assassination missions and the freedom to loot and pillage his way across the open sea. It all makes for a truly fantastic gaming experience that very rarely puts a foot wrong – the one obvious exception being the parallel modern day storyline, which feels more like a prologue to a new story rather than a complete adventure in its own right.

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag is also no slouch when it comes to showcasing your console's AV prowess. Graphically the tropical locations are as rich and colourful as you could hope for, while the sea battles manage to both look lush and keep ticking over at a decent frame rate. The game's audio also impresses, breathing life into the locations with well-realised ambient effects.



Batman: Arkham Origins

Warner Bros. Interactive → Xbox 360/PS3/PC/Wii U → £50 Approx



Batman: Arkham Asylum and *Batman: Arkham City* were not only two of the best superhero games ever made, they also rank among our favourite games of all time. So, naturally, we were intrigued by this third game in the series – one that takes you back to Batman's early days and pits him against eight assassins who

have been hired by Gotham crime lord Black Mask.

Unfortunately, as you can no doubt tell from the star rating below, *Batman: Arkham Origins* simply isn't as good as its predecessors. The major blame for this has to rest on the shoulders of

new developer Warner Bros. Games Montréal, which struggles to find anything new to do with the series and can't escape out from under shadow of original series developer Rocksteady Studios. This isn't to say that the game isn't fun. It's just that none of the new additions really add anything to the existing game template and – more annoyingly – the fighting now feels slightly less responsive, which is a bit of a problem given your need to build up combat combos.

The one real innovation is the debut of an online multiplayer mode that pits a team playing as Batman and Robin against two rival criminal gangs. Like the main game it's not perfect, but the oddball combination of *Gears of War*-style third-person shooting and Batman stealth is a fun way to while away the hours.



Jurassic Park 3D

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£28 Approx



Fans of Spielberg's dino-tastic blockbuster will definitely want to check out this 3D conversion. The stereoscopy itself is very well handled, while the Blu-ray transfer is based on a new 4K

master – although the shift to 3D (including some necessary grain reduction) has resulted in a drop in detail. The film's DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix has also been revised for improved dynamics. Sadly, the 2D platter included in the set houses none of the AV alterations, as it replicates the original Blu-ray release.



Blackfish

Dogwoof → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Why would a captive orca kill a trainer at SeaWorld, when there are no records of any attacks on humans in the wild? The obvious answer, as this gripping documentary reveals,

lies with the word 'captive' and the abuse that these intelligent aquatic mammals are subjected to over their lives. On Blu-ray the film's AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode and LPCM 2.0/DD5.1 soundtracks are understandably limited by the archival source material – however it trumps the DVD version with superior extras including a commentary and additional interviews.



Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Arrow delivers another Blu-ray belter with this fantastic hi-def outing for Philip Kaufman's superb 1978 remake. Based on the same HD master that MGM created for its US release, the

disc's AVC 1.85:1 1080p visuals are suitably dark, oppressive and yet surprisingly refined. Slightly subdued LPCM 2.0 and DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes are included (both of which correct the missing audio glitch from the US release), as are a commentary, seven featurettes (three of which are new) and the trailer.





From awesome
to claw-some

Unleashing the comic book action

Extended Blu-ray cut of the latest *X-Men* spin-off finally lets its central character off the leash

→ THE WOLVERINE 3D

Set after the events of *X-Men: The Last Stand*, this latest spin-off sees Wolverine head off to Japan in a tale inspired by Chris Claremont and Frank Miller's celebrated 1982 comic book series.

Utilising the same mix of action and introspection, director James Mangold's film helps flesh out the character while also letting him flay the flesh from the bones of his enemies. As such, *The Wolverine* marks a new cinematic high point for Hugh Jackman's mutant and gives fresh hope for next year's *X-Men: Days of Future Past*.

Picture: The set includes three versions of the film – 3D theatrical cut, 2D theatrical cut and 2D 'Unleashed Extended Cut' – each on its own BD.

Unsurprisingly, the two 'flat' AVC-encoded 2.40:1 1080p encodes are pretty much identical from a technical standpoint. Scenes such as Chapter 15's funeral fracas marry expertly-rendered fast-paced action with intricate detailing and rich colour saturation. On the flip side, Wolverine's nighttime showdown with the ninjas in Chapter 28 is a perfect example of the clarity of the image when handling low-light levels.

The MVC 2.40:1 1080p stereoscopic version also hold up very well in terms of the quality of the encoding itself. However, the 3D conversion itself is another matter.



Unlike the more convincing examples we've seen, the overall effect of the conversion is similar to a pop-up book, with clearly delineated layers in the imagery, rather than a cohesive sense of depth running throughout. A handful of sequences, such as the cleverly staged bullet train brawl in Chapter 16 are rather more convincing, but in the main the 3D feels more like an afterthought than a key part of the experience.

Audio: All three presentations of the film feature an enjoyably energetic DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack. Separation across the soundstage is utterly seamless and bass response reaches some truly impressive lows during the opening nuclear explosion, and when Wolverine takes on the Silver Samurai in the film's showdown. So even if it can't quite match the likes

of *Man of Steel* in terms of sheer raw power, this is still a fine mix that AV fans will love.

Extras: On this BD release, the 2D theatrical cut is accompanied by the hour-long, *Path of the Ronin* documentary, the trailer, an alternate ending, a promo for *X-Men: Days of Future Past* and a Second Screen App (providing extra *Making of...* content).

As well as adding 12 minutes of footage to the film (including some fun ninja-mulching), the 'Unleashed Extended Cut' also features a rather dry chat track from director James Mangold and the Second Screen App.



Viper swears by regular skin peels to keep her looking young and beautiful



HCC VERDICT

The Wolverine 3D: Unleashed Extended Edition

→ 20th Century Fox

→ Region A/B BD → £28 Approx

WE SAY: A top-notch Blu-ray package for one of the best *X-Men* movies yet

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

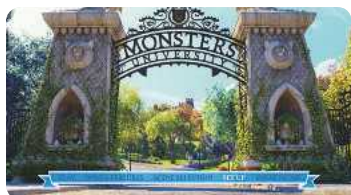
Overall ★★★★★

'You can tell by the way I use my walk, I'm a woman's man, no time to talk...'



Pixar suffers a campus calamity

Animal House-style antics fail to add any spice to studio's unimaginative animated prequel



HCC VERDICT

Monsters University 3D

→ Walt Disney Home Entertainment
→ All-region BD → £28 Approx

WE SAY: Pixar's dull campus cartoon passes the AV test with honours on BD – but is a fail when it comes to extras

Movie ★★☆☆☆

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★☆☆☆☆

Overall ★★☆☆☆

→ MONSTERS UNIVERSITY 3D

It's hard to imagine that 2013 will ever be thought of as a vintage year for Pixar. Where once the studio offered breathtakingly original flights of animated fancy, this year saw it release the merchandise-led Cars spin-off *Planes* and this laboured prequel to 2001's *Monsters, Inc.*

A run through of tired college movie tropes, *Monsters University* lacks the heart and wit of its predecessor and shows all the signs of a studio that has lost its way and is content churning out quick and easy sequels for undemanding kids. Pah. **Picture:** The set includes two Blu-ray discs, one for the 3D version of the film, the other for the 2D one. Both are exquisite examples of 1080p imagery.

While the MVC 1.78:1 1080p presentation isn't the most immersive 3D you'll ever see, it's impossible to fault the clarity and convincing sense of depth contained in the image. Surprisingly, it's the smaller things that impress the most, such as the subtle volumetric effects evident in the close-up of Mike's cap in Chapter 4.

Naturally, the 2D AVC encode is a riot of vibrant colours, perfect black levels and meticulous textures. Simply marvellous.

Audio: Pixar's *Monsters University* comes to Blu-ray with a technically impressive Dolby TrueHD 7.1 soundtrack that exhibits the kind of clarity and precision fans have come to expect based on Pixar's acoustically-awesome earlier Blu-rays.

Our only issue is that the mix feels rather reticent to release its inner beast. Sure, Sully's roars pack plenty of low-end heft, and directional effects such as the scream canister flying around the lecture hall in Chapter 10 are entirely convincing, but such delights aren't quite as common as you might expect. It's a shame, because had the mix really embraced its monstrous side, then it could have been reference quality rather merely very, very good.

Extras: The only extra feature included on the 3D platter is a stereoscopic presentation of the new Pixar short *Blue Umbrella*. A 2D version of this appears on the set's 2D disc, which also benefits from an audio commentary for the main feature by director Dan Scanlon, producer Kori Rae and story supervisor Kelsey Mann. And that's it.

So what has become of the third Blu-ray disc that was included in the US release?

The one containing ten behind-the-scenes featurettes, four deleted scenes, four 'Set Flythroughs', promotional material and five art galleries? Well, that is available in the UK, but only as part of a Sainsburys-exclusive two-disc version of the 2D Blu-ray release. Which means that Disney UK presumably expects anybody who wants both the 3D version of the film and all of the extra features to buy two separate releases.

For a less expensive option, you could simply import the All-region US *Monsters University: Ultimate Collector's Edition* Blu-ray set instead...



Fright Night 2: New Blood

20th Century Fox → All-region BD
£20 Approx



Despite masquerading as a sequel to the 2011 Colin Farrell film, this is in fact yet another remake of the 1985

original. Admittedly, the action has been relocated to Romania and the vampire has undergone a change of gender, but otherwise it's the same story we've already seen twice before. Only this time it looks cheaper, is less well acted and lacks both humour and scares. On a more positive note, this Blu-ray benefits from a nicely saturated AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode and effective DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics. Extras include a chat-track and four webisodes.



Schalcken the Painter

BFI Flipside → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£23 Approx



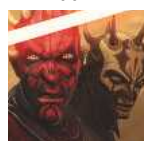
Originally screened by the BBC in December 1979, this intriguing drama may be based on Sheridan Le Fanu's

story of the same name, but is as much a portrait of Dutch artist Godfried Schalcken as it is a traditional slice of Gothic horror. Shot on 16mm film, the BFI's AVC 1.33:1 1080p presentation looks suitably rough with inky blacks and thick grain evident throughout. Interesting extras include a lengthy interview with writer/director Leslie Megahey and a pair of Gothic shorts – *The Pit* (1962) and *The Pledge* (1982) – also presented in HD. The set also includes a booklet of essays about the three films.



Star Wars: The Clone Wars – Season Five

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£40 Approx



This fifth season may be as uneven as ever, but it remains the only good thing to have come out of those accursed *Star Wars* prequels. On Blu-ray it also sounds

like no other TV show around – with every episode accompanied by DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes that are every bit as dynamic as those on the live-action films. Minor instances of banding still affect some of the AVC 2.40:1 1080p transfers, but it's a small blemish on otherwise impeccable CG imagery. The two-disc set also offers video commentaries for all 20 episodes as well as the usual production archives.



Modern Family: Season Four

20th Century Fox → Region A/B BD
£35 Approx



Now in its fourth year, not only does *Modern Family* show no signs of running out of steam, but it continues to

deliver more laughs per episode than any other mainstream sitcom we can think of. Fox's three-disc Blu-ray release also maintains the technical quality of the previous seasons with its colourful AVC 1.78:1 1080p imagery and excellent dialogue clarity in the DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks. Fun extras take the form of four episode commentaries, three behind-the-scenes featurettes, a gag reel and deleted/alternate scenes.



There and back again (and again)

Boosted bass and more extras make *The Hobbit* more appealing second time around

→ THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY 3D – EXTENDED EDITION

The first part of Peter Jackson's three-film adaptation of *The Hobbit* returns to Blu-ray with 13 minutes of additional footage.

Sadly there's nothing here that really adds to the plot or – more critically – makes up for the lack of characterisation that prevents us from getting to know the majority of Bilbo's travelling companions. Instead it's mostly goofy stuff such as the dwarves bathing in a sacred fountain in Rivendell and even more singing (even the Goblin King gets to belt out a tune this time around).

In truth, it's no better or worse than the earlier cut. Merely longer. Make of that what you will...

Picture: As with the original release, this Extended Edition of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* looks absolutely sensational in both its 2.40:1-framed AVC 2D and MVC 3D guises.

Indeed, there's very little to add here that we didn't say in our original review. Colours are still richly saturated, detailing is impeccable, edge definition is excellent and there are no trace of obvious technical anomalies (which is no mean feat given that all 183 minutes of the 'flat' version are have been squeezed onto a single disc). Highly impressive.

Audio: Warner Home Video appears to have paid attention to complaints about the rather limited LFE in the original Blu-ray's soundtrack and has definitely pushed the low-end deeper in the DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix used in this release. Otherwise it's business as usual for anyone familiar with the film's previous



Meet Middle-earth's answer to SuBo

soundtrack. There's plenty of impressive directionality on show, alongside crystal-clear dialogue and rich musical tones.

Extras: This is where this five-disc set really comes into its own. Not only is the 2D presentation of the film accompanied by a typically fascinating commentary by Jackson and co-writer/producer Philippa Boyens, but there are also two dual-layer Blu-ray platters dedicated solely to extra features.

The first disc, *The Appendices Part 7: A Long-Expected Journey*, is home to over four hours of behind-the-scenes documentaries and featurettes taking us from pre-production right up to the film's premiere (and we also get a few peeks at the filming of *...The Desolation of Smaug*).

The second disc, *The Appendices Part 8: Return to Middle-Earth*, takes a closer look at the characters and places featured in the film via an additional four hours and forty-five minutes' worth of featurettes.



HCC VERDICT

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey 3D – Extended Edition

→ Warner Home Video

→ All-region BD → £28 Approx

WE SAY: Bigger is better as far as this Blu-ray's AV and extras are concerned

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



High-definition boxset with a cause

A trio of new 4K restorations add plenty of lustre to Hollywood legend's filmography

→ JAMES DEAN: ULTIMATE COLLECTOR'S EDITION

James Dean only completed three movies before his untimely death, but what films they were. Biblical allegory *East of Eden* (1953) ranks among director Elia Kazan's best work, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) is a subversive masterpiece, and *Giant* (1956) is every bit as epic as its title indicates.

Picture: All three of the films are based on 4K scans of the original camera negatives that were then restored and colour corrected at Warner Bros. Motion Picture Imaging. As you might expect, the results are as good as anybody could realistically hope for.

Both *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* are presented at 2.55:1 and both do an excellent job of replicating the subtleties of the films' colour palettes and feature very natural-looking grain texture.

Giant's AVC encode is framed at 1.66:1 and while colour reproduction is very good, it looks a little softer

and lacks detail in comparison to the other two. But, as this is down to the number of optical dissolves in the film and the need to use dupes rather than the original negatives for certain scenes, it's difficult to see anyway it could be improved upon.

Audio: *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* feature DTS-HD MA versions of the 5.1 remixes created for their DVD releases. Both are sympathetic to the source material and – thankfully – don't try too hard to push cues and effects into the surrounds. On the other hand, *Giant* opts for a DTS-HD MA



These days this trio of delinquents would all be slapped with ASBOs



dual-mono mix that sounds entirely true to the original audio elements.

Extras: Each of the three films is accompanied by the same plethora of extras that appeared on the old

Special Edition DVD releases. In the case of *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* they have all been transferred over to the Blu-ray disc, while the majority of *Giant's* are relegated to a bonus DVD due to the film's length.

Two further DVDs contain the documentaries *James Dean: Forever Young* (84 minutes) and *James Dean: Sense Memories* (51 minutes). Also included in the DVD-height box are a 40-page commemorative booklet, three poster reproductions, five reproduction studio memos and 12 behind-the-scenes photos.

HCC VERDICT

James Dean: Ultimate Collector's Edition

→ Warner Home Video → All-region BD /R2 DVD → £35 Approx

WE SAY: Beautifully restored and loaded with extras – a terrific boxset

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Nosferatu

Eureka: The Masters of Cinema Series
Region B BD → £25 Approx



F.W. Murnau's legendary silent adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* may have turned 91 this year, but for us it remains the definitive screen version of the story [although *Dracula: Dead*

and *Loving It comes a close second – Ed*]. And while this hi-def platter's restored 1.33:1 1080p transfer still suffers from scratches and splices, it is far superior to any previous release, with greatly improved clarity and stability. The score is provided in both LPCM 2.0 and DTS-HD MA 5.1 incarnations – both sound simply gorgeous. A pair of commentaries and a 52-minute documentary are among the Blu-ray's excellent bonus features.

★★★★★

Betty Blue

Second Sight → All-region BD/R2 DVD
£20 Approx



These days *Betty Blue* is primarily remembered for that opening scene and for being the poster that decorated so many

student digs. But look a little closer and you'll find a searing portrait of a damaged love that – despite some iffy gender politics – proves just as electrifying today as it did back in 1986. This very handsome hi-def release includes colourful AVC 1.66:1 1080p encodes of both the theatrical cut of the film and the superior longer edit. A bonus DVD plays host to a superb new hour-long *Making of...* featuring interviews with the principal cast and crew, plus Béatrice Dalle's original screen test.

★★★★★

JFK

20th Century Fox → All-region BD
£17 Approx



Whatever your personal opinion might be on the conspiracy theories that continue to surround the assassination of

John F. Kennedy, Oliver Stone used them to great effect in creating this powerful and engrossing thriller. Sadly, this Blu-ray's AVC 2.40:1 1080p imagery isn't without a handful of problems, most notably issues with the black level and contrast (outside of the deliberately blooming whites). As well as featuring Stone's 'Director's Cut' of *JFK*, the disc also offers a chat-track, a lengthy documentary, 55 minutes of deleted scenes and two 'multimedia essays'.

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POINT OF VIEW

With a trio of broken components offering nothing in the way of resale value, **Richard Stevenson** wonders how he will be able to afford his next cinema upgrade

WHAT IS THE value of your home cinema system? Not the rather nebulous value associated with life-enrichment, neighbour-annoying LFE and bigscreen entertainment, but the actual monetary value? This thought has been playing on my mind of late, sired by the spontaneous keeling-over of several key pieces of fairly high-end equipment.

You see, I have never gone out and spent an absolutely obscene amount of money on my home cinema system. Not all in one go anyway. It has been a 20-year process of incremental upgrades and hardware evolutions. Rarely has a period of six months gone by without some component being ousted for the next big thing. Quite literally where subwoofers and speakers are concerned.

And I have a well-practised argument for this incremental upgrade philosophy too, mostly to justify said 'next big thing' to the wife. I explain to her that **continually and regularly upgrading your AV system is logical and financially advantageous.**

It's all about maintenance of residual value. The true cost of any hardware upgrade is actually the cost of the new kit minus what you can get for your old stuff when you sell it second-hand. Change out kit while it is still relatively current and it will realise a sale value that represents a good chunk of what you paid for it. Thank the omnipotent buyer-scope of the good ship eBay for that one.

So, while the asking price of the best monster amps, seismic subs or HD 3D projectors is high, you won't have to find anything like the RRP if you are part financing the deal by selling a nearly-new model only a rung or two down the specification ladder. Every desirable new toy in my AV system has been contemplated, costed and fiscally justified on the strength of the residual value of the outgoing kit.

So last month, when my BD player, CD player and pre-amp all suffered terminal electro-mechanical demise, it left me up a very expensive creek without a fiscal paddle. The BD player retails at £1,000 and, in its now 'beyond economical repair' state, is worth about a tenner to anyone who wants a spare remote control. The pre-amp, at two-and-a-half grand, is still being looked at but the engineer's prognosis was not overly positive for an outcome that didn't involve a very large repair bill. Somewhat outside my early-upgrade philosophy but more annoyingly, my much loved 2001-vintage Sony SCD1 CD player was actually beginning to increase in value before it died. As this is not a model Sony can now fix, it went from being capable of fetching over £2,000 on eBay to whatever I can get for 30-odd kilos of scrap metal.

All I want for Christmas

Not only can I not afford to upgrade 'willy-nilly' (as my wife says), I don't have funds for replacement kit to get the system back to the level of performance it previously achieved. I have identified several potential paths to rectify this sorry situation, yet most are flawed. Hand-written notes to Santa won't work ('cos he doesn't exist) and getting credit – from a retailer or a bank – is inevitably expensive in the long term thanks to interest. Second-hand purchase? Well, this is cheaper than buying new, but kipped by the very reason my upgrade philosophy works so well: nearly new high-end AV kit very rarely comes up for sale second-hand and, when it does, it fetches nearly as much as the new price.

So, while I watch Blu-rays on my PS3, take this as advice – sell your AV gear before it breaks, and use the money to upgrade ■

*Do you upgrade your AV hardware regularly?
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Richard Stevenson is playing one of the ugly sisters in a pantomime version of Cinderella. He's not been asked to wear any makeup



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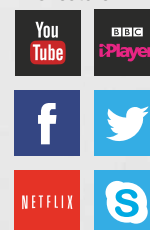
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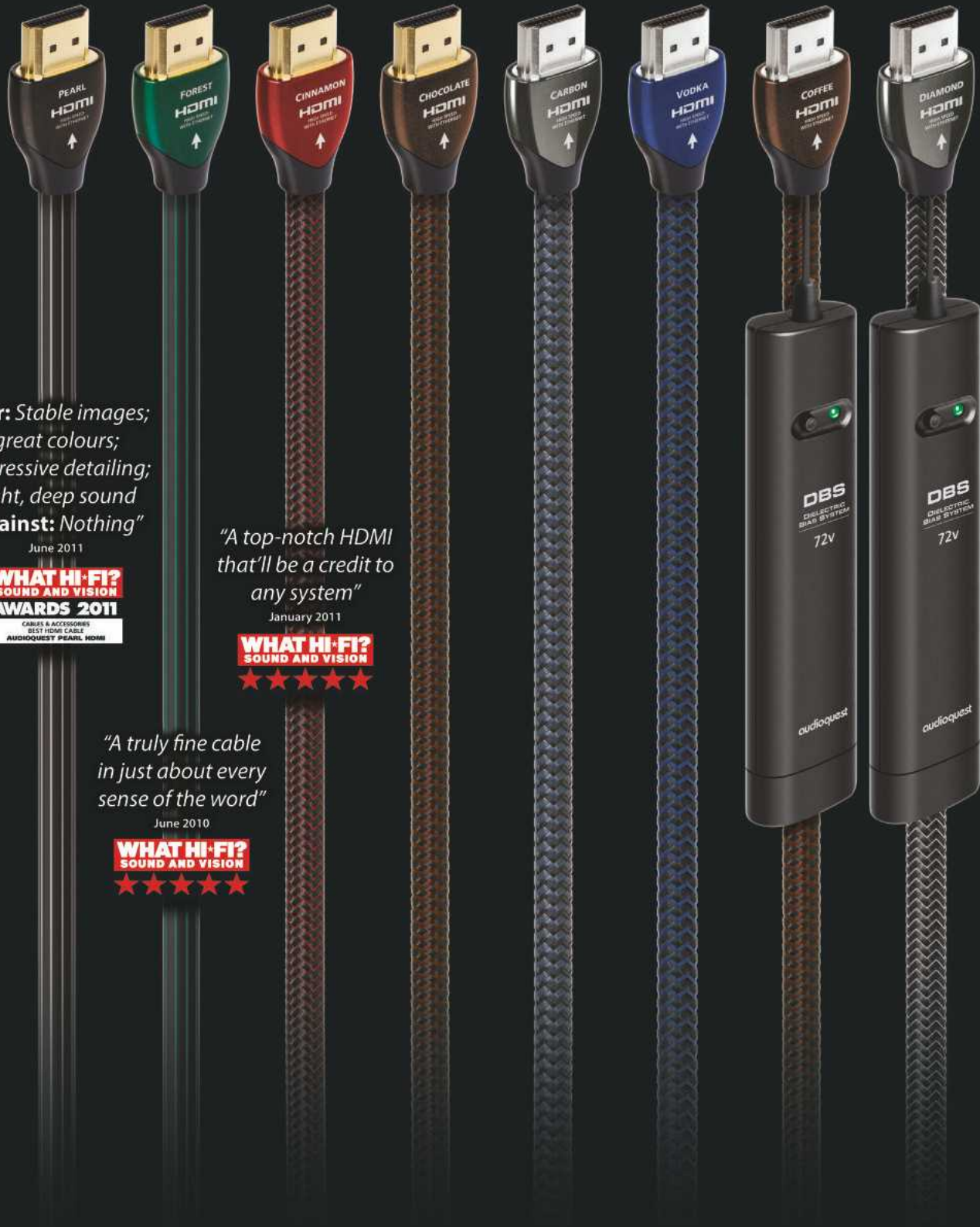
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